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Introduction to the Liturgical Year

The Church's calendar begins, not on January 1, but on the First Sunday of Advent, four Sundays before Christmas. Liturgical time is structured loosely around the progression of the story of the Christ Event. During the coming year our congregation—and all congregations and denominations that use a lectionary (a set of four biblical readings drawn from the First Testament, the Psalms, the Epistles, and the Gospels) for each Sunday and holy day in a three-year cycle—will hear the story of Christ primarily offered in the voice of the Gospel of Matthew. With Advent beginning, it is helpful to remind ourselves of the liturgical year as a whole.

Advent: The four Sundays before Christmas focus on the theme of waiting for God to come to (*ad* = “to” + *vent* = “come”) us in Christ (not only in Christ's birth, but in our present lives and in God's future). Because Advent was originally similar in penitential tone and practice to Lent, the color for the season is purple, although some churches now use blue to distinguish the kind of preparation called for by Advent from the preparatory practices of Lent.

Christmas: The twelve days of Christmas begin, not end, with Christmas Day on December 25. White, the color used for the holiest of days and seasons of the Christian year, is displayed during this season to celebrate the nativity and childhood of Christ. The number of Sundays in this season varies depending on what day of the week Christmas falls and whether Epiphany is celebrated on January 6 or the Sunday preceding it.

Sundays after Epiphany: The day of Epiphany commemorates the epiphany (i.e., revelation or manifestation) of the Christ child to the magi. The “Sundays after Epiphany” continue highlighting God's revelation in Christ's ministry, marked with the bookend stories of Christ's baptism and Christ's transfiguration, both of which present a heavenly voice declaring Jesus to be God's Child. This thematic season evolved from a tradition of considering the time between Epiphany and Ash Wednesday to be Ordinary Time (like the Season after Pentecost), and thus the color for the season is green (with white being used for Baptism of the Lord and Transfiguration Sunday).

Lent: The forty days of Lent begin with Ash Wednesday and extend through Holy Week, not including Sundays. The length of the season is rooted in the story of Jesus' forty-day temptation before he began his ministry, and reminds the church that Lent began as a season of testing and preparation for converts to Christianity who were to be baptized on Easter. Because the season focuses on penitence and fasting as well as on the passion of Christ, with all its tones of royalty, the color for the season is purple.

Easter: The season of Easter, following the chronology established by Luke in the beginning of the book of Acts, begins on Easter Sunday and extends for fifty days through Ascension (forty days after Easter Sunday) to Pentecost. Since Easter is the central liturgical season for the Christian year, its color is white (changing to red for the Day of Pentecost). Celebrating the resurrection and ascension of Christ and the gift of the Spirit to the church, this season draws the high liturgical seasons to a close.

Sundays after Pentecost or Ordinary Time: Commemorating the exaltation of Christ and the coming of the Spirit, who gave birth to the post-resurrection church, the Day of Pentecost sets up liturgical practice to move into the season of the church, if you will. Although there are a few, scattered, thematically focused days during this season (for example, Trinity Sunday, All Saints', and Reign of Christ), the approximately six-month season is primarily a time for building up of the church through the reading and preaching of scripture. Thus this season is called Ordinary Time.

Advent

Year A

Introduction for Advent

The word *advent* means “to come to.” Advent, therefore, is the season in which the church looks forward to God’s coming to us in Christ—Emmanuel, God-with-us. The advent of God, however, involves much more than just the birth of Christ two thousand years ago. So while Advent prepares us for Christmas, the season includes the expectation that God is always in our future. This includes both the potential to come to us in the immediate future of our daily lives and in the culmination of time itself, often referred to in popular lingo as Christ’s Second Coming.

Introduction for Advent 1A

The First Sunday of Advent, which is the first Sunday of the liturgical year and thus a New Year's Day of sorts, always focuses on God's future. Specifically, each year the day is centered on Jesus' promise just before his death that the Son of man will come with power and glory.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Isaiah 2:1–5

Through all of Advent and most of the season of Christmas, the reading from the First Testament comes from the book of Isaiah. In our first reading, the prophet, some seven hundred years or so before Christ, looks forward to the day in which God will establish the temple in Jerusalem as the center of worship for all the nations and thus also establish peace among all peoples.

Psalms 122

The Psalter reading for the day echoes the themes of the Isaiah prophecy just read. Pilgrims approaching Jerusalem offer praise for the temple and pray for its peace.

Romans 13:11–14

Three of the four Epistle readings during Advent this year come from Romans. In today's lesson, Paul uses the metaphor of "staying awake" to describe a moral posture not conforming to the present age but being oriented toward the coming day of the Lord.

Matthew 24:36–44

Each year of the three-year lectionary cycle centers on Matthew, Mark, or Luke. During the coming liturgical year, the Gospel reading for most Sundays will come from Matthew. Today's reading from Matthew, as is true of the Gospel lection for the First Sunday of Advent every year, comes from Jesus' speech that occurs just after he leaves the temple in Jerusalem for the last time during the week of his passion. The speech begins with Jesus predicting the fall of the temple and moves on to describe the promise of the coming of the Son of man. In our reading, taken from the latter part of the discourse, Jesus uses language similar to Paul's in calling the disciples to stay awake in expectation for that advent.

Introduction for Advent 2A

On the First Sunday of Advent, the church looked forward to the coming of the Son of man in final victory. In contrast, the advent of God-in-Christ lifted up on the Second and Third Sundays of Advent is the ministry of Jesus as foreshadowed by the ministry of John the Baptist.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Isaiah 11:1–10

The early church understood our first reading to be a prediction of Jesus, as the messiah who was from the line of David. This is an understandable application of the text, given that in its original context, the oracle envisioned a descendent of David being anointed king over Judah to restore justice to the throne. Echoing the theme of peace from last week's reading from Isaiah, the text imagines the peace that the prophet hopes this king will establish in metaphorical terms of animals of prey living peacefully with those usually hunted.

Psalms 72:1–7, 18–19

Echoing the lection from Isaiah, our Psalter reading for today comes from portions of a prayer for the king of Israel. In addition to praying that his life might be long, the psalmist asks that the king, as God's instrument, might rule with justice and establish peace.

Romans 15:4–13

Our reading from Romans concludes the section of the letter in which Paul offers ethical instructions to his readers—the section from which we read an earlier portion last week. In this passage, Paul calls for his readers to live in peace with one another, especially Jew and Gentile. To support his exhortation, Paul offers a number of scriptural quotations, including one from our Isaiah lesson for today.

Matthew 3:1–12

The Gospel lesson for the Second Sunday of Advent always comes from narratives describing the ministry of John the Baptist, who preceded Jesus' ministry. In Matthew's version, we hear John calling the Pharisees and Sadducees to repent and be baptized as well as proclaiming to them that one is coming after him who will baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit.

Introduction for Advent 3A

The advent of God that is lifted up on the Third Sunday of Advent, as with last Sunday, is the ministry of Jesus as foreshadowed by John the Baptist. Traditionally, this Sunday was called *Gaudete* (Latin for “rejoice”) Sunday, because the season of waiting and expectation was halfway done.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Isaiah 35:1–10

The Babylonian Empire conquered the kingdom of Judah in 597 B.C.E., resulting in Jerusalem being occupied, the temple destroyed, and much of the population taken into exile. This oracle from the book of Isaiah envisions a reversal of fates in which God will come to lead the exiled back to Jerusalem. The prophet speaks of the reversal in poetic terms of the desert transforming into a garden and in language of healing that is used by Jesus in our Gospel reading to describe his own ministry.

Psalm 146:5–10

The Psalter reading for the day proceeds from the second half of one of the hymns of praise that draw the book of Psalms to a close. The psalm expresses well the tone of rejoicing that characterizes this day. In language that echoes our reading from Isaiah, Psalm 146 praises the God of creation for being on the side of the sick and the oppressed.

OR Luke 1:47–55

Each year during Advent, the Magnificat—Mary’s prophetic and poetic speech in response to Elizabeth’s recognition that Mary is to be the mother of the Lord—is offered as an alternative to the Psalter reading. Mary’s speech is especially appropriate on Gaudete Sunday since it begins with the claim that her spirit rejoices in the One who reverses the fates of the powerful and weak, the rich and the poor.

James 5:7–10

Our Epistle reading relates less to today’s themes of rejoicing or reversal that dominate Gaudete Sunday, and more to the general Advent theme of waiting for the coming of the Lord that we have heard in readings on the previous two Sundays. The author of James calls us to wait patiently, like farmers awaiting their crops.

Matthew 11:2–11

Last week’s Gospel lesson presented John the Baptist testifying to one who would come after him. In today’s reading, set later in the Gospel narrative, John, who is now in prison, has his followers ask Jesus *if* he is “the one who is to come.” Jesus affirms that he is, using the language of reversal and healing drawn from our Isaiah reading for today.

Introduction for Advent 4A

As Advent draws to a close, the expectation of the coming of the Lord specifically focuses on preparing for the birth of the Christ child and thus on the transition from the liturgical posture of waiting for God to come to us in Christ (in Advent) to the reception of Christ as Emmanuel, God with us (in Christmas).

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Isaiah 7:10–16

In the Greek translation of Isaiah that the early church used, the passage we are about to read says that a virgin will bear a son named Immanuel, God-with-us. This line shaped the Christian understanding of both Jesus, as God-Incarnate, and Mary, as the virgin mother. In the original Hebrew, however, the text actually refers to a young woman, not a virgin, and the young woman is already pregnant. The prophetic sign offered to King Ahaz is the *naming* of her son, not a miraculous birth. The sign proclaims that God will come to protect Judah from its enemies.

Psalms 80:1–7, 17–19

Similar to the prophetic sign in Isaiah, Psalm 80 is a prayer that God might save God's people from their enemies. In a tone that is in contrast to last week's reading from James, which called for patience in waiting for the Lord, the portion of the psalm read today includes a prayer of exasperation, which asks how long the people will have to wait, how long will their prayers for restoration go unanswered.

Romans 1:1–7

Although Paul begins his letters with formulaic greetings, these greetings also foreshadow major themes that he plans to discuss and hint at some of his core theological assumptions. In the opening to his letter to the Romans, Paul describes the Gospel concerning God's Son as being promised beforehand in the scriptures and notes that God's Son was a descendant of David. These two themes illustrate well the interpretive bridge that the early church used to connect First Testament prophecies with the birth of Christ.

Matthew 1:18–25

In telling of how Jesus came to be born, the Gospel of Luke focuses on Mary. But in Matthew the focus is on Joseph. In today's Gospel reading, we hear the story of his encounter with the angel. We also hear Matthew explicitly claim that Jesus' birth would fulfill the prophecy from the Greek version of Isaiah 7 we just read—that a virgin would bear a son to be named Emmanuel, God-with-us.

Christmas

Year A

Introduction for Christmas

Although secular culture considers the season of Christmas to be the time preparing for Christmas Day (December 25), the church considers the four weeks leading up to Christmas to be the Season of Advent, in which we prepare not only for Christ's coming in his birth but also Christ's coming in our daily lives and "in final victory." The *Season* of Christmas actually begins on Christmas Eve or Day and proceeds to Epiphany (January 6). This is, of course, the season in which we celebrate the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. But it is more than that. Celebrating the birth story leads the church to ponder the significance of the Incarnation, of God becoming human, of Christ being fully human and fully divine—in other words, of God-with-us.

Introduction for Christmas Eve

While today we think of each day as beginning at sunrise, ancient Jews thought of sundown as the beginning of a new day. In addition, the ancient church prepared for many of its major feasts with a fast the day before. These two facts combine to explain why the modern church celebrates the first service of Christmas on Christmas Eve. On this day the church celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ, child of Mary, Son of God. Every year on this day, we read the same scripture lessons.

Introduction for Christmas Day

Two major feast days, Christmas and Easter, anchor the Christian year. On this day the church celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ, child of Mary, Son of God. Every year on this day, we read the same scripture lessons.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections for Christmas Eve/Day

[NOTE: Although most Protestant churches only use one set of lections for Christmas, the Revised Common Lectionary assigns three propers for Christmas for those congregations that have multiple services, following the tradition of celebrating Christmas mass at night (Christmas Eve), dawn, and during the day. In the cumulative preaching strategies, only the first proper is considered. However, in years when Christmas Eve falls on a Saturday, churches that usually only have a Christmas Eve service will need a different set of readings for Christmas Day. Therefore, we include introductions for all propers at this point.]

Christmas – Proper 1

Isaiah 9:2–7

Our reading from Isaiah is an oracle concerning the coronation of a king who would restore the Davidic rule over Judah, replacing oppression with justice. The language of a son being born and the grand titles applied to him reflect the ancient understanding of divine adoption that occurred when each new king was crowned. The early church interpreted this coronation oracle in relation to the birth and ministry of Jesus.

Psalm 96

Psalm 96 echoes the royal language of our Isaiah lesson, but here the language is applied to God instead of the Judean throne. Indeed, this hymn praises God as the ruler of the universe. Read today, the psalmist's call for the heavens to be glad and the earth to rejoice prepares us for the angels' song and the shepherds' praise at Jesus' birth.

Titus 2:11–14

In the Pastoral letter to Titus, the writer grounds his moral exhortation with the passage we are about to read. It is a fitting text for Christmas because, while it carries forward the Advent theme of always waiting for the manifestation of Christ, it also opens with the claim, "The grace of God *has* appeared, bringing salvation to all."

Luke 2:1–14 (15–20)

As Advent has leaned in toward this day, so our earlier lections bow down toward our Gospel reading. Of the four Gospels, only Luke and Matthew tell us of Jesus' birth. Matthew's version is brief, so we turn to Luke's longer story. We hear of the displacement of Joseph and Mary, the birth in a stable, and the revelation to poor shepherds.

Christmas – Proper 2

Isaiah 62:6–12

In a moment we will listen as angels proclaim to the shepherds that a savior has arrived. First, however, we listen to the prophet proclaim to postexilic Jerusalem that salvation is arriving.

Psalm 97

Psalm 97 is an enthronement hymn celebrating God's rule over the earth. God's reign will establish righteousness and justice. We read this psalm today because of the traditional claim on Christmas that Christ is the newborn king.

Titus 3:4–7

Read on Christmas Day, our Epistle lection reminds us of the very reason Christ appeared—so that we might be saved according to God's mercy.

Luke 2:(1–7) 8–20

Every Christmas, we read Luke's version of the nativity. It is a familiar but powerful story. We hear of the displacement of Joseph and Mary, the birth in a stable, and the revelation of salvation to poor shepherds.

Christmas – Proper 3

Isaiah 52:7–10

Because a common theme of Christmas is that Christ is born as a king, our First Testament lesson comes from a passage in Isaiah in which God is imagined as a victorious king returning to Jerusalem and bringing salvation to the destroyed city.

Psalm 98

Psalm 98 is a hymn celebrating God's reign that brings salvation to Israel. We read this psalm today because of the traditional claim on Christmas that Christ is the newborn king.

Hebrews 1:1–4 (5–12)

We read from the opening of Hebrews on Christmas Day, for the author sums up the significance of the Christ Event as God speaking to us through God's Son. The view of Christ in the passage celebrates the high status of Christ, as superior to angels. Indeed, like our Gospel reading, the passage speaks of the world being created through Christ.

John 1:1–14

While the Gospels of Matthew and Luke narrate for us the details of the story of Jesus' birth, John theologizes poetically and philosophically about the Incarnation of the Word of God, through which the world was created. The paradoxical language John uses of the Word being *with* God and *being* God has long shaped the church's understanding of Christ as God-with-us.

Introduction for Christmas 1A

The First Sunday after Christmas focuses on a story from Jesus' childhood. This means that the time from the celebration of the nativity to the celebration of the revelation of the Christ child to the magi on Epiphany on January 6 is structured liturgically, not chronologically. This year the First Sunday of Christmas actually focuses on the events that resulted from the magi's visit to the new ruler.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections¹

Isaiah 63:7–9

The lesson from Isaiah comprises the opening lines of a lengthy community lament praying for God's compassion in a time of suffering. The lament, however, opens by recounting God's redemptive acts of the past, especially God's presence leading the children of Israel out of Egypt. This reference to the exodus prepares us to hear Matthew tell of Jesus' flight to Egypt.

Psalms 148

While the other three lections for the First Sunday after Christmas change each year, the Psalter reading is always 148. Appropriate to the celebratory themes of the Christmas season, this psalm (like all of the Psalter readings during the season of Christmas) is a hymn of praise. The psalmist calls the entire cosmos, all of heaven and earth, to join in a chorus of praise.

Hebrews 2:10–18

The reading from Hebrews focuses on the aspect of the Incarnation that means Jesus, as one who became human, suffered as all humans suffer. Indeed, this suffering that he shared with all humanity is at the root of salvation. The language of common suffering and the metaphor of children prepare us for the Gospel lesson for the day.

Matthew 2:13–23

Today's Gospel reading depicts God's protection of Jesus when Herod seeks to kill him. The Holy Family flees to Egypt and is then called out of Egypt in a manner that foreshadows the way that Matthew, throughout his Gospel, portrays Jesus as a Moses-figure. Although Jesus is saved, many who are innocent are slaughtered. Herod's violence reminds us that those who prosper most from the *status quo* will violently resist the in-breaking of God's transforming presence.

¹In congregations that celebrate Epiphany Sunday on the Sunday before January 6 when the sixth falls on a day other than Sunday, there will never be a Second Sunday after Christmas. (In fact, if the sixth falls on a Friday or Saturday, there will be no First Sunday after Christmas.) The earlier *Common Lectionary* recommended that if the second alternate set of lections for Christmas were not used on Christmas Eve or Day, they should be used later during the Christmas season because of the importance of John's prologue for the New Testament understanding of the Incarnation. The other option is to substitute the readings for Christmas 2 (which includes John 1:[1–9] 10–18) for Christmas 1 in (some) years where there is only one Sunday after Christmas.

Introduction for Christmas 2A²

The readings for the Second Sunday after Christmas are the same every year. They focus our attention on the meaning of the Incarnation in terms of God's providential salvation. The first three readings all invite celebratory praise for God's good gifts and self-revelation as well as refer to the word of God in a way that foreshadows our reading of the prologue to the Gospel of John.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Jeremiah 31:7–14

As with some of our readings from Jeremiah during the fall, this passage envisions a return from the Babylonian exile that evokes great celebration and praise. The word of the Lord declares salvation in that a remnant of Israel shall gather and sing praises in Zion.

Psalms 147:12–20

Psalms 147 is actually composed of three hymns pasted together. The first two celebrate God as ruler of history and of nature. Echoing our reading from Jeremiah, which celebrates the return to the promised land, the third hymn, which we read today, rejoices in the God of Zion—Jerusalem, from whence God's word comes forth.

Ephesians 1:3–14

Following the standard greeting of an ancient letter, Ephesians opens with a doxology, praising God for what God has done in Christ. The author celebrates that the salvation and revelation God effected through the word of truth of Christ was willed by God before the foundation of the world.

John 1:(1–9) 10–18

While the Gospels of Matthew and Luke narrate the details of the story of Jesus' birth, John theologizes poetically and philosophically about the Incarnation of the Word of God, through which the world was created. The paradoxical language John uses of the Word being *with* God and *being* God has long shaped the church's understanding of both Christ as God-with-us and the Trinity.

²See previous note on Christmas 1.

Introduction for Epiphany, Year A

January 6 is Epiphany. The word *epiphany* means “revelation,” and so this liturgical occasion celebrates the revealing of Christ to the Gentiles by focusing on the coming of the magi from the East to see and worship the Christ child in Bethlehem. Epiphany actually predates Christmas, and still today in some cultures Epiphany is the highpoint of the Christmas season, with celebrations and gifts given as they are in our culture on December 25. Epiphany represents a hinge between two seasons, drawing the twelve days of Christmas and the celebration of the nativity to a close and opening the Season after Epiphany, when the church celebrates the manifold ways in which Christ’s true nature is revealed.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Isaiah 60:1–6

Our First Testament reading is the opening of a three-chapter-long section of Isaiah envisioning the restoration of the glory of Jerusalem after the exiles have returned from Babylon. This portion of the poem is used for Epiphany each year because it declares that God’s presence will be revealed to Zion and it speaks of foreign caravans bringing tribute of gold and frankincense to the Lord.

Psalms 72:1–7, 10–14

Psalms 72 is a royal hymn celebrating the coronation of a king. The prayer asks that the king might rule with justice and equity, defending those who have been oppressed. Today we read portions of the psalm in which the language echoes forward to the magi caravanning to give homage to the new king.

Ephesians 3:1–12

Our reading from Ephesians does not speak of the magi or the Christ child. But in a tone especially appropriate for Epiphany, it does declare that God’s grace has been revealed to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus.

Matthew 2:1–12

While Luke tells of the Christ child being revealed to shepherds in a stable, Matthew tells of foreign magi—astrologers—following a star in the west that revealed the birth of a new king and led them to a house in Bethlehem. Matthew uses language and imagery from Psalms 72 and Isaiah 60 to describe their pilgrimage and their tribute.

Sundays after Epiphany

Year A

Introduction for the Sundays after Epiphany

The day of Epiphany (January 6) is a liturgical hinge in the Christian year. It draws the Christmas season to a close and opens the Season after Epiphany. For much of the history of the liturgical year, the time between Epiphany and Ash Wednesday was considered Ordinary Time, like the Sundays after Pentecost. For Protestants, however, the Sundays after Epiphany focus on the revelation of God in the person and ministry of Jesus Christ. This revelation is highlighted by opening and closing the season with celebrations of Jesus' baptism and of his transfiguration, both of which involve a heavenly voice declaring Jesus to be God's Son.

Introduction for Baptism of the Lord (Epiphany 1A)

When Epiphany first developed in the Eastern Church in the fourth century, it celebrated the revelation of Jesus as the Son of God in his birth, baptism, and first miracle (the changing of water into wine at the wedding in Cana). Throughout the centuries these different manifestations have been separated into individual celebrations. It is now standard practice to celebrate the Baptism of the Lord on the First Sunday after Epiphany each year. Not only do we remember Christ's baptism on this day, but we also remember the significance of the church's sacrament of baptism.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Isaiah 42:1–9

The Servant Songs in Isaiah have been interpreted through much of the history of the church to refer to Jesus. However, when read in its original context, our reading describes the people of Israel as the servant who will take over the role of an individual king in establishing peace and justice in the world. The oracle's language of God putting God's Spirit on the servant people foreshadows the Holy Spirit's descent upon Jesus during his baptism.

Psalm 29

Because of its emphasis on the voice of God, particularly the voice of God over the waters, Psalm 29 has long been associated with the celebration of Jesus' baptism, and is read every year on this Sunday. In this hymn of praise, God is honored as the One who reveals divine power in the forces of a mighty thunderstorm and who is enthroned in heaven in order to bring peace to the earth.

Acts 10:34–43

Every year on the Baptism of the Lord, the lectionary omits an Epistle reading and substitutes in its place a reading from Acts that deals with the early church's practice and understanding of baptism. Following last Sunday's emphasis on the revelation of Christ to the Gentiles, today's reading from Acts is drawn from the story of the conversion of the first Gentiles. In his sermon, Peter describes Jesus' ministry as beginning with John's baptism.

Matthew 3:13–17

The story of Jesus' baptism is the focal reading for today. Each Gospel has a version of the story that is significantly different from those in the other Gospels. Unique to Matthew's version is John's resistance to baptizing Jesus and the fact that in the epiphany that occurs the voice claiming Jesus as God's Son is a public event for the benefit of those gathered at the Jordan instead of a private epiphany offered to Jesus alone.

Introduction for Epiphany 2A

The lectionary that defines scripture readings for each Sunday of the Christian year is based on a three-year cycle focusing primarily on the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Since the Gospel of John does not anchor a year of its own, readings from it are offered each year during the season of Lent and Easter. Following last week's celebration of the Baptism of the Lord, however, the lectionary this week switches from Matthew to John to allow us to hear the Fourth Gospel's version of Jesus' baptism, which is quite different from the other Gospels.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Isaiah 49:1–7

Last week's reading from Isaiah was the first of the four so-called Servant Songs, which the church has usually interpreted to refer to Jesus. Today we read from the second of the Servant Songs and again find that the prophet originally intended Israel itself to be understood as the servant. Similar to the church's understanding of baptism as a call to ministry, the servant in this passage is called to be a light to all nations.

Psalm 40:1–11

Our Psalter reading comes from the first half of Psalm 40. This portion of the psalm is an individual's song of thanksgiving for deliverance. The language of thanksgiving is similar to the reading from Isaiah, for as with that commission scene here the singer claims to respond to God's requirements by doing God's will and proclaiming the glad news of God's deliverance in the great congregation.

1 Corinthians 1:1–9

During most of the liturgical year from Advent through Pentecost, the four lectionary readings for each Sunday are thematically connected. But the Sundays after Epiphany have only recently evolved into a thematic season. The Sundays used to comprise Ordinary Time sandwiched between the liturgical cycles focused on Christmas and Easter. One of the remnants of that tradition is that the Epistle readings for these Sundays for the three years of the lectionary cycle proceed from 1 and 2 Corinthians without any significant thematic relation to the other lections. Today's reading is the opening verses of Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth. While Paul basically follows the standard form of address in ancient letter writing style, he also uses the address to introduce themes that he will raise in the body of the letter. Being enriched by speech and knowledge, the possession of spiritual gifts, and looking forward to the day of the Lord are key themes in 1 Corinthians.

John 1:29–42

John's Gospel doesn't actually narrate Jesus' baptism but instead presents John the Baptist giving testimony to Jesus after the fact. John describes how God used the descent of the Spirit at Jesus' baptism to reveal that Jesus was God's Son. John's testimony concerning Jesus' baptism leads to the calling of the first disciples.

Introduction for Epiphany 3A

Following the celebration of Christ's nativity at Christmas and his revelation to the magi on Epiphany, the first two Sundays after Epiphany have focused on Jesus' baptism. Today the liturgical focus is the beginning of Jesus' ministry immediately after the arrest of John the Baptist.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Isaiah 9:1–4

Today's lesson from Isaiah is a portion of the oracle we read on Christmas. It concerns the coronation of a king who would restore the Davidic rule over Judah, replacing oppression with justice. This passage is also appropriate for the season of Epiphany because it includes the theme of revelation to the Gentiles. The text's language of a light coming to Galilee is used in our Gospel reading from Matthew to interpret the beginning of Jesus' Galilean ministry.

Psalms 27:1, 4–9

Our Psalter reading is a portion of a temple prayer asking God for help in the face of false accusations. The request that God not ignore the petitioner's need flows out of an expression of deep confidence in God's salvation and providence. The psalm is chosen for this day because it opens with a reference to the Lord as "my light," an image used in Isaiah and Matthew and especially appropriate for the season's emphasis on revelation.

1 Corinthians 1:10–18

Our Epistle reading continues the process of reading through 1 Corinthians that we began last week. Here Paul jumps immediately into his reason for writing—he has heard that the house churches at Corinth are deeply divided, with groups boasting to one another of their different allegiances.

Matthew 4:12–23

Immediately after being baptized by John and then being led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested, Matthew tells us that Jesus began his Galilean ministry, fulfilling the text we read earlier from Isaiah. Matthew gives us a one-sentence summary of Jesus' proclamation and shows how he begins the process of gathering disciples to follow him, in a story that sounds quite different from the version of the call of the disciples we read last week in John.

Introduction for Epiphany 4A

Last week, the Gospel reading told of the beginning of Jesus' ministry, offering a summary of his preaching and a glance at the call of the first disciples. This week, we begin a series of Gospel readings from what Matthew records as Jesus' first detailed speech, the Sermon on the Mount. The theme of one's character before God connects the Gospel reading with the readings from Micah and the Psalms.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Micah 6:1–8

Our reading from the book of Micah presents God taking Israel to court for their faithlessness before a jury composed of the elements of nature. When the defendant responds to God's complaint by asking how much of a sacrifice is required to please God, the Lord answers with a verdict that stands as a summary of the whole prophetic tradition's call to righteousness and justice.

Psalm 15

As with our reading from Micah, Psalm 15 asks the question concerning what God requires—specifically what God requires of those who seek entry into the temple. As with Micah, the answer given is not in terms of sacrifice but in terms of one's moral character.

1 Corinthians 1:18–31

Today's lection from 1 Corinthians begins with the last verse of last week's Epistle reading, in which we heard Paul naming the divisions that existed in the Corinthian house churches as manifested by groups boasting to one another of their allegiances to different leaders. In the passage we are about to read, Paul makes clear that no one has grounds to boast except to boast in the foolishness of the Gospel of Christ crucified.

Matthew 5:1–12

Matthew divides Jesus' teachings into five great thematic discourses. The first is the ethical discourse commonly called the Sermon on the Mount. In our lesson for today, Jesus opens the discourse with nine blessings, or beatitudes. Luke's version of the beatitudes presents Jesus as describing the salvation of the oppressed, for example in the words, "Blessed are you who are poor." But Matthew's version deals more with the hearers' character: "Blessed are the poor *in spirit*."

Introduction for Epiphany 5A

In line with the season of Epiphany's emphasis on revelation, today's Epistle reading speaks of the Spirit revealing to us God's wisdom. With a twist on the theme of revelation, however, the other three lections speak of the light that shines, not from God, but from those who keep God's commandments and act in a righteous manner: "Your light shall rise in the darkness" (Isaiah 58:10), "They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright" (Psalm 112:4), "You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14).

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Isaiah 58:1–9a (9b–12)

In last week's reading from Micah, Israel asked what kind of sacrifice they needed to perform to please God, and the Lord said that what is required is to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God. Similarly, in today's reading from Isaiah, the people are frustrated that God is silent in response to their fasts. The prophet responds by saying that the fast the Lord desires is that we act justly by caring for the poor and oppressed.

Psalm 112:1–9 (10)

Similar to our reading from Isaiah, Psalm 112 is a wisdom song celebrating those who delight in God's commandments and whose righteousness endures forever. Those who act with justice and give to the poor will be blessed.

1 Corinthians 2:1–12 (13–16)

In today's Epistle reading, Paul continues the argument that we have read over the course of the last two weeks. He asserts that the Corinthian churches should not be divided because they have nothing in which to boast but Christ crucified. Indeed, he reminds the Corinthians that he came preaching this message not in words of wisdom but with a demonstration of the Spirit—the Spirit from whom they have received spiritual gifts and who grants them spiritual discernment.

Matthew 5:13–20

Like our readings from Isaiah 58 and Psalm 112, today's Gospel lection is concerned with God's commandments and the practicing of righteousness. In this key passage from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes clear that he has not come to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfill them.

Introduction for Epiphany 6A (Proper 1)

The season of Epiphany this year reads through a portion of 1 Corinthians and a portion of the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew. While these two semicontinuous readings are unrelated, the lections from the First Testament are thematically connected to the Gospel readings, focusing on the living out of God's commandments.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Deuteronomy 30:15–20

Today's reading from Deuteronomy is part of an extended scene in which Moses calls the Israelites to make a new covenant with God. This covenant extends the one established with the giving of the Ten Commandments in the wilderness by adding many commandments for how the people should live together when they enter the promised land. Moses makes an impassioned plea describing the choice to obey God's commandments or not as a choice between life and death.

Psalms 119:1–8

Our Psalter reading is the opening stanza of a 176-verse meditation celebrating God's law. As a poetic device and so that no one may have too narrow a definition of God's law, in most of the twenty-two stanzas of the psalm, the psalmist offers eight different synonyms for the torah.

1 Corinthians 3:1–9

In last week's reading from 1 Corinthians, Paul reminded the Corinthians that he came preaching the Gospel of Christ crucified not in words of wisdom but with a demonstration of the Spirit. Thus the Corinthians should be spiritual people, but their divisions and boasting make clear they are still people of the flesh, no more than infants in Christ.

Matthew 5:21–37

In last week's reading from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus claimed that he had not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. In this week's and next week's Gospel readings, Matthew presents Jesus as portraying what it means for him to fulfill the law by reinterpreting ancient commandments for the ethical, Christian life. For each example, Jesus uses the antithetical form, "You have heard that it was said...but I say to you..."

Introduction for Epiphany 7A (Proper 2)

For several weeks our Gospel lections have been taken from Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. Today's reading stays with the central theme on which we focused for the past two weeks: God's commandments.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Leviticus 19:1–2, 9–18

Leviticus records many of ancient Israel's ritual and ethical laws. Our reading for today comes from a section defining a life of holiness in terms of the charitable and ethical treatment of others. It concludes with the great commandment to love your neighbor as yourself.

Psalms 119:33–4

Last week we read the first stanza of Psalm 119, a twenty-two-stanza poem celebrating God's law. This week's Psalter reading skips to the fifth stanza, but sounds very similar to the first. As with most of the other stanzas, this one uses eight synonyms for the law, both for poetic variation and so that no one may cling to too narrow a definition of God's torah.

1 Corinthians 3:10–11, 16–23

A few weeks ago we listened as Paul chastised the Corinthian church for its divisions, with some boasting that they were Paul's and others that they were Apollos's. We listened last week as Paul tried to bind the church together spiritually by reminding them that Paul and Apollos were not competitors in ministry. Today Paul continues his efforts but shifts metaphors from agriculture to construction.

Matthew 5:38–48

Two weeks ago in our reading from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus claimed that he had not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. In last week's and this week's readings from Matthew, Jesus unpacks what it means for him to have fulfilled the law by interpreting ancient commandments for the ethical, Christian life, using the form, "You have heard that it was said...but I say to you..." Our reading for today refers specifically to the commandment to "love our neighbor" read in our passage from Leviticus.

Introduction for Epiphany 8A (Proper 3)

While we continue this week reading through the opening chapters of 1 Corinthians in which Paul deals with divisions in the church, the other readings focus our attention on our dependence on God.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Isaiah 49:8–16a

On the Second Sunday after Epiphany, we read the opening seven verses of Isaiah 49, the second of the so-called Servant Songs in Isaiah. Today we return to Isaiah 49, to the passage immediately following that reading, in which the prophet speaks of God's restoration of those in exile in providential terms of setting prisoners free to feed on the side of the road by which God will lead them home.

Psalm 131

Psalm 131 is a song of ascent uttered as pilgrims approached the temple. In this song, those praying speak humbly of knowing their place before God in language that prepares us to hear Jesus call us to imitate the birds of the air and the lilies of the field.

1 Corinthians 4:1–5

For weeks in our readings from 1 Corinthians, Paul has been dealing with divisions in the church. Today's reading makes it clear that the boasting about who belongs to Paul and who to Apollos has also led to a critique of the apostle's ministry, because Paul defends his ministry, claiming that God alone is to judge him.

Matthew 6:24–34

Our Gospel lection continues our series of readings from the Sermon on the Mount. In this passage, Jesus warns against letting a desire for worldly wealth block one's orientation to God, describing God's providence in terms of the feeding of the birds of the air and the growth of the lilies of the field.

Introduction for Transfiguration of the Lord, Year A

On the First Sunday after Epiphany, we listened as the heavenly voice at Jesus' baptism declared him to be God's Son. We listen to that voice again today as we celebrate the epiphany in which Jesus' glory was revealed to his inner group of disciples.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Exodus 24:12–18

Our First Testament lesson comes at the end of a section of the book of Exodus that presents the Israelites as receiving the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant from the Lord. Following a covenant ceremony in which the people declare that they will be obedient to all that the Lord has spoken, God calls Moses up to the mountain to receive the stone tablets containing the law. In language the Gospel writer borrows to describe Jesus' transfiguration, the glory of the Lord settles on the mountain in the form of a cloud for six days.

Psalm 2

Our Psalter lection is a royal psalm celebrating the coronation of a king in Zion, God's holy hill. Of special interest to us today is the middle section of the psalm, in which God ratifies the choice of the king with language of adoption that is similar to what is spoken by the voice on the Mount of Transfiguration: "You are my son; today I have begotten you."

OR Psalm 99

The Psalter reading celebrates the Lord's royalty. God's holy rule is described in terms of great power and justice. The psalm is fitting for today because it names Moses, who appears in both our First Testament and Gospel readings, as one of the great priests who called upon the Lord and because it recalls that God spoke to the great priests in the pillar of cloud.

2 Peter 1:16–21

Second Peter is a defense of apostolic teaching for a day after the apostles were gone. In our reading for today, the author refutes the claim that the apostolic prophecy that Jesus would come with power in the future was mistaken. He does so by referring to the way Jesus' transfiguration already revealed him to be the Messianic king and Son of God described in Psalm 2.

Matthew 17:1–9

According to Matthew, when Jesus asked the disciples who they said he was, Peter proclaimed him to be the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus' response to Peter included the first prediction of his death and resurrection. In our reading for today, which follows this scene, Jesus and an inner group of disciples go up a mountain, where Jesus is transfigured so that his glory is revealed. The great epiphany involves the appearance of Moses and Elijah, the cloud of God's presence, and the heavenly voice declaring Jesus to be God's Son.

Lent

Year A

Introduction for Lent

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and extends through Holy Week. It is a season of fasting and penitence rooted in the ancient church's practice of preparing adult converts for baptism on Easter Day. Modeled on the forty days Jesus fasted in the wilderness, Lent is forty days long. However, because fasting is not appropriate on the day of resurrection (and since every Sunday is a little Easter), the forty-day period does not include Sundays. Thus, the church speaks of Sundays *in* Lent as opposed to Sundays *of* Lent (compare the Sundays *of* Advent). This year during Lent, the church reads of the salvation history recounted in the First Testament, of Paul's understanding of salvation as expressed in his letter to the Romans, and of Jesus extending salvation to individuals in the Gospel of John.

Introduction for Ash Wednesday, Year A

Applying ashes to oneself is an ancient sign of mourning or of penitence. On Ash Wednesday both of these ideas are present. We remind ourselves that we are mortal and grieve that we will return to the dust. This reminder calls us to repent before a gracious and forgiving God. The penitential theme of the day initiates a season of penitence, and thus Ash Wednesday is also a day when we are invited to focus on Christian disciplines of piety during the season of Lent. The scripture readings for this day are the same every year.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Joel 2:1–2, 12–17

The book of Joel prophetically calls for responses to great locust swarms (which are perhaps metaphors for invading armies) that come as a sign of God's judgment. Today's reading calls the people to respond to the plague and prepare for the day of Lord, which is imminent, with repentance and fasting.

Psalm 51:1–17

In this penitential psalm, an individual, who is filled with guilt for sins committed, confesses and prays for forgiveness and cleansing.

2 Corinthians 5:20b—6:10

In this reading from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, the apostle proclaims that God effects our reconciliation with God by making Christ to be sin so that we might become the righteousness of God. This salvation, however, does not lead to a life of blessing in human terms. In a season in which the church lifts up the virtue of abstinence, it is important to hear Paul describe the blessing he has experienced *in the midst of* the suffering he has experienced as an apostle.

Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

The Gospel lection for today is taken from the Sermon on the Mount, as were most of the readings during the Season after Epiphany. However, the tone has shifted. In this reading, Jesus instructs his disciples to practice the religious disciplines of charity, praying, and fasting in a manner that brings honor to God and not to them.

Introduction for Lent 1A

The First Sunday in Lent each year sets the tone for the season by focusing on the temptation of Christ. As Christ fasted for forty days, so do we practice Lenten disciplines for forty days of Lent—spiritual practices that we are tempted to forego.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Genesis 2:15–17; 3:1–7

The First Testament readings for the Sundays in Lent paint the salvation history presented in the First Testament in broad strokes by focusing on the key moments of origins—Abraham, the exodus, the nation—and the future day of the Lord. Today’s reading comes from the story of the garden of Eden, where the first human couple eats the fruit from the forbidden tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Psalm 32

Today’s Psalter reading is a penitential psalm, like the reading for Ash Wednesday. However, the tone here is primarily one of thanksgiving for God’s gracious forgiveness.

Romans 5:12–19

Through most of Lent we will be reading from the letter to the Romans. In today’s passage Paul describes salvation in terms that echo back to our reading from Genesis. In Paul’s terms, as sin and death came into the world through Adam, grace and life came through Christ.

Matthew 4:1–11

The Sundays after Epiphany open with the story of Jesus’ baptism, where a heavenly voice declares Jesus to be God’s Son. Lent opens with the story that follows that scene. After his baptism, the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness, where Satan tests what it means for Jesus to be the Son of God.

Introduction for Lent 2A

The Second Sunday in Lent keeps the church reading Genesis and Romans, as we did last week. But we also begin a new focus for the season, in the Gospel lessons, on Jesus' interaction with various individuals throughout his ministry.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Genesis 12:1–4a

As the First Testament readings for Lent take us on a journey through the history of God's acts of salvation presented in the First Testament, we move from last week's reading about Eve and Adam to God establishing a covenant with Abraham and promising him great blessing.

Psalm 121

In this song of ascent, the psalmist celebrates God's providential help in a manner that echoes the divine blessing bestowed upon Abraham in our First Testament lection.

Romans 4:1–5, 13–17

As Paul interpreted salvation in contrast to the story of Adam's fall in last week's Epistle reading, so in this week's reading he interprets salvation in light of Abraham's faith, linking this reading with our First Testament lection. Paul's argument is that as God reckoned to Abraham righteousness based on his faith and not on works, so are we justified by faith and not by law.

John 3:1–17

While Paul uses the legal metaphor of justification to describe salvation, in his encounter with Nicodemus in the Gospel of John, Jesus uses the metaphor of being born from above.

Introduction for Lent 3A

On the Third Sunday in Lent we continue reading through an overview of key events in the First Testament narrative, through parts of Paul's interpretation of salvation in the letter to the Romans, and through John's account of Jesus engaging in redemptive conversation with different individuals. In accordance with Lent being a season of preparation for baptism, today's lections are filled with water imagery.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Exodus 17:1–7

Having read stories dealing with the origin of humankind and the initial covenant God made with Abraham on the first two Sundays in Lent, today's First Testament lection comes from the story of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. The story takes place while the Hebrews are in the wilderness and fear death by dehydration. God answers their fear by bringing water from a rock.

Psalms 95

Our Psalter reading for today is a processional psalm that serves as a call to praise. Echoing the reading from Exodus, God is referred to as the rock of our salvation, and hearers are warned not to harden their hearts as had those at Meribah and Massah.

Romans 5:1–11

We continue reading from Paul's discussion of justification in his letter to the Romans, as we have for the last two weeks. In a lesson appropriate for the Lenten focus on Christ's passion, here Paul offers a theological interpretation of Jesus' death as bringing about reconciliation between God and humankind.

John 4:5–42

Last week our reading from John presented Jesus in conversation with Nicodemus, the Pharisee. Today's lesson presents an extended conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. In language reminiscent of our reading from Exodus, Jesus offers the woman himself as salvation using the metaphor of living water.

Introduction for Lent 4A

The scripture readings for the Fourth Sunday in Lent involve varied themes, but a central one is the radical change that God can effect in human lives: David is taken from shepherd boy to king-to-be; Ephesians speaks of the Christian faith as moving us from darkness to light, from death to life; and Jesus gives sight to a blind man, symbolizing the journey into faith.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

1 Samuel 16:1–13

Over the first three Sundays of Lent, our First Testament lections have had us reading stories of Adam and Eve eating forbidden fruit, God making a covenant with Abraham, and God giving the Hebrews water from a rock in the wilderness. Now we move past the exodus to the time that Israel was being established as a nation. Specifically, we find God instructing Samuel to anoint a new king to follow Saul.

Psalm 23

Having heard of David, the shepherd boy, being anointed king of Israel in our First Testament reading, we now read a psalm of trust attributed to David, in which the Lord is declared the psalmist's shepherd. This psalm is an appropriate one for Lent given the fact that it was used in the ancient church in connection with the rite of baptism.

Ephesians 5:8–14

Today is the only Sunday in Lent this year that we do not read from Romans. Instead we turn to Ephesians, where the author speaks of his Gentile audience's conversion in terms of moving from darkness to light. The language of escaping darkness recalls Psalm 23 as the theme of conversion foreshadows our Gospel reading for the day.

John 9:1–41

As it has for the previous Sundays in Lent, today's Gospel reading focuses on Jesus' impact on an individual in John's Gospel. On its surface, the story appears to be a healing story. But at a deeper level the story is not just about a man gaining his sight, it is about how a man comes to see Jesus for who he really is when others do not.

Introduction for Lent 5A

On this last Sunday before Holy Week, the readings foreshadow where we have been heading throughout Lent: Easter. It may seem premature to focus on resurrection on the Fifth Sunday of Lent, but the theme is lifted up in a manner that foreshadows Jesus being raised from the dead as well as reminding us that resurrection always lies in our future, not just in the biblical past.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Ezekiel 37:1–14

The First Testament readings for Lent have followed a salvation history schema of origins: Abraham, exodus, and the nation. On this final week of the schema, we turn to a prophetic vision of God's future. Ezekiel writes to a people who no longer believe that their land will be restored after the Babylonian exile. The prophet offers them hope with a vision of God giving life to a valley of dry bones.

Psalms 130

In this song of ascent, the psalmist cries out to God for personal and national redemption that will reflect the dawning of a new morning.

Romans 8:6–11

Today we return to the letter to the Romans, from which most of our Epistle lections have come during Lent. In this passage Paul contrasts two ways of life, setting the mind on the flesh, which is death, and setting the mind on the Spirit, which is life.

John 11:1–45

Continuing to focus on Jesus' encounters with individuals in the Gospel of John, today's Gospel lection narrates Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead. In preparation for the miracle, Jesus declares to Martha, the sister of Mary and Lazarus, that *he* is resurrection and life. It is important to recognize that for the plot of John this sign of raising the dead is what leads the religious leaders to plot to kill Jesus.

Introduction for Holy Week, Year A

Holy Week is the culmination of Lent and the hinge that swings into Easter. From Palm/Passion Sunday to Easter Sunday, the church remembers and celebrates the core of the Christian story, the anchor of the liturgical year. Holy Week focuses on Jesus' last week in Jerusalem, including the triumphant entry, the Last Supper and foot washing, the crucifixion, and burial; and then on Easter, of course, we celebrate the resurrection. Most of the scripture readings for this week are the same every year.

Introduction for Palm/Passion Sunday, Year A

Palm Sunday is the celebration of the story of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, when the crowd laid clothes and branches before him as a carpet for royalty. The day also, however, provides an opportunity to hear the whole story of Jesus' last week in Jerusalem leading up to his death on the cross. Thus, the service begins with the liturgy of the palms and moves into the liturgy of the passion. Testifying to the unity of the Lenten season from beginning to end, palms used in worship on this day are burned to make the ashes used on Ash Wednesday of the following year.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Liturgy of the Palms

Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29

Psalm 118 is used on Palm Sunday because it was as a processional song of pilgrims approaching the temple, singing about binding the festal procession with branches. Indeed, the Gospel writers put the words, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD," on the lips of the crowd accompanying Jesus into Jerusalem.

Matthew 21:1–11

The Gospels present Jesus' entry into Jerusalem in terms of an ancient coronation ceremony in which the king rode into the city to be anointed and crowned in the temple. Using the First Testament in a manner typical of Matthew's Gospel, the narrator in today's passage claims Jesus' action is a fulfillment of a prophetic oracle from Zechariah and has the crowd shout words of acclamation taken from Psalm 118.

Liturgy of the Passion

Isaiah 50:4–9a

Isaiah 40–55, a section referred to by scholars as Second Isaiah, contains four poems called the Servant Songs. The identification of the suffering servant about whom the prophet was originally speaking is disputed, but the early church interpreted the poems to be predictions of Jesus and his passion. Every year during Holy Week, the church reads these Servant Songs to reflect on the meaning of redemption that comes through suffering.

Psalm 31:9–16

Psalm 31 is a prayer in which the psalmist petitions for divine protection from his enemies. The section we read today uses language similar to that of Isaiah 50 in naming intense suffering from which the psalmist seeks rescue.

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Philippians 2:5–11

In Philippians 2, Paul quotes a hymn that may well have already been familiar to his readers. This pre-Pauline hymn describes Christ as being in the form of God but emptying himself and becoming human, resulting in his death and subsequent exaltation.

Matthew 26:14—27:66

Having begun the service with Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, we now read of his last hours. On most Sundays, the church reads only short passages from the Gospels. But today we hear the cornerstone of the Gospel message in its fullness—Judas' betrayal; Jesus' last supper with his disciples; his arrest and trials; and his suffering, death, and burial.

Introduction for Holy Monday, Year A

After remembering the broad strokes of the story of Jesus' last days on Palm/Passion Sunday, we turn during Holy Week to concentrate on individual events during those days. On the Fifth Sunday of Lent we read of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Today we hear of the responses to that miracle set six days prior to Passover.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Isaiah 42:1–9

Throughout Holy Week, the church reads the Servant Songs from Isaiah 40—55 because the early church understood these poems to be predictions about Jesus. While this interpretation is no longer held, reading them during Holy Week helps us understand significant elements of the New Testament's interpretation of Jesus' ministry and crucifixion. Today's Servant Song describes the servant as one who brings God's justice to God's people.

Psalms 36:5–11

Psalms 36 is an individual's prayer for help. In the section we read today, however, the psalmist declares in language reminiscent of the Servant Songs that God's steadfast love that overcomes wickedness knows no limits.

Hebrews 9:11–15

Using metaphoric language of the ancient sacrificial system, the author of Hebrews interprets Christ's death as mediating a new covenant between God and God's people.

John 12:1–11

On Palm/Passion Sunday we read the bulk of Matthew's version of Jesus' last week in Jerusalem. Throughout the rest of Holy Week we read individual scenes from this week according to John's Gospel. In today's lesson, we hear of two responses to Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead—Mary, Lazarus' sister, symbolically anoints Jesus as messiah in thanksgiving for the miracle; and the religious leaders plot to have Jesus killed.

Introduction for Holy Tuesday, Year A

On Holy Monday, we listened to the story of the religious leaders plotting to kill Jesus. Today we hear John tell of Jesus preparing for and beginning to prepare his disciples for that death.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Isaiah 49:1–7

As we continue reading the Servant Songs from the section of the book of Isaiah referred to as Second Isaiah, we hear a description of the servant being called by God even while in his mother's womb. The servant's role is not only to restore Israel after the exile but also to bring salvation to *all* nations. Read during Holy Week, the text resonates with the Christian claim that God's salvation in Christ is for all people.

Psalms 71:1–14

Psalms 71 is the prayer of someone near the end of his or her life, asking God for continued protection. In language similar to Isaiah 49, the psalmist reminds God that God has provided for the psalmist since God took that person from her or his mother's womb.

1 Corinthians 1:18–31

The Christian claim that God's salvation is somehow conveyed by the death of Jesus is paradoxical to say the least. As we journey another day closer to the cross, we listen as Paul defends God's foolishness.

John 12:20–36

Having read yesterday of the plot to kill Jesus as narrated early in John 12, today's reading comes from later in the chapter when Jesus withdraws from public view because the hour of his glorification has arrived. As he explains this withdrawal to his disciples, he predicts his death and resurrection that are coming soon.

Introduction for Holy Wednesday, Year A

Midway through Holy Week, we take a step closer to the cross. On Holy Wednesday, we listen as Jesus names Judas to be the one who will hand him over to the religious authorities.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Isaiah 50:4–9a

As the lectionary's choices for First Testament readings during Holy Week continue to focus on Isaiah's Servant Songs, we return to the reading for Palm/Passion Sunday. In the Servant Songs read today and on Good Friday, the church especially attends to language of vicarious suffering to help understand the significance of Jesus' redemptive suffering on the cross.

Psalm 70

Our Psalter reading is an individual's prayer for protection from oppressors who seek to kill him. During Holy Week, the anguish expressed in the prayer reminds us of Jesus facing his own death.

Hebrews 12:1–3

In this passage from Hebrews, the author calls the readers to persevere in the faith. The fact that Christ has perfected faith by enduring the shame and suffering of the cross is the basis of their ability to persevere.

John 13:21–32

Just before the passage we read from John today is the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet and instructing them to love one another. Having served them, he now tells them that one of them will betray him. This betrayal will lead to his glorification, which in John refers to Jesus' death and resurrection.

Introduction for Holy Thursday, Year A

Holy Thursday is also known as Maundy Thursday. The word *Maundy* shares the same root as *commandment*, and refers to Jesus giving the “new commandment” to his disciples to love one another as he first loved them. Continuing on the church’s Holy Week journey to the cross, this is the day we remember Jesus’ last supper. For us, this involves a special liturgical remembrance of the institution of the Lord’s Supper, lifted up in our reading from 1 Corinthians. John’s Gospel, however, does not narrate Jesus giving bread and wine to his disciples. The Fourth Gospel tells instead of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet.

This day begins the Easter or Paschal Triduum (three days), referring to Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Vigil/Sunday.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Exodus 12:1–4 (5–10) 11–14

While most of the other First Testament lections during Holy Week proceed from the Servant Songs in Isaiah, today the lectionary directs our attention to the institution of Passover in the book of Exodus. This text sets the stage for focusing on Jesus’ last supper with the disciples on Passover.

Psalms 116:1–2, 12–19

Psalms 116 is one of the psalms traditionally sung after the Passover meal. It is a prayer of thanksgiving to God for delivering the psalmist from the threat of death.

1 Corinthians 11:23–26

Our Epistle reading records the earliest tradition in scripture of the account of Christ instituting the Lord’s Supper as a meal that proclaims his death.

John 13:1–17, 31b–35

In the chronology of John’s narrative, at supper on the night before Passover Jesus washes his disciples’ feet as a model for their ministry before his departure. In the tradition of ancient biblical characters offering a final testament before dying, Jesus uses this occasion to offer a final instruction, to give a new commandment.

Introduction for Good Friday, Year A

Also called Great, Sorrowful, Holy, and even Long Friday, it is not clear how this day came to be called “Good.” What is clear about the designation, however, is that it expresses the paradox of this sacred day. Commemorating Jesus’ death at the hands of the religious and political authorities, Good Friday both reveals the depths of human sin and the expanse of God’s grace. Holy Week’s journey to the cross draws to a close.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Isaiah 52:13—53:12

Of all of Isaiah’s Servant Songs from which the church has read during Holy Week, this final song has probably had the strongest influence on the church’s interpretation of Christ’s passion. This is due to the song’s deep pathos, strong imagery of violence, and significant claims of the servant’s vicarious suffering on behalf of others.

Psalms 22

The Gospel writers used Psalm 22 to inspire the way they tell the story of Christ’s suffering and death, even to the point of having Jesus cry out its opening line while hanging on the cross. The fact that the psalm paradoxically begins with a plea for deliverance and ends with thanksgiving makes it a poignant reading for Good Friday.

Hebrews 10:16–25 OR Hebrews 4:14–16; 5:7–9

As seen in earlier readings from Hebrews during Holy Week, the author of this book holds the death of Christ to be a once-for-all sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins in which Christians can trust absolutely. Today’s reading expresses that view once again.

John 18:1—19:42

The extended Gospel reading for today offers John’s version of Jesus’ arrest, Peter’s denial, the trial before Pilate, the mocking by the soldiers, the crucifixion, death, and the burial.

Introduction for Holy Saturday, Year A

In accordance with the ancient Jewish understanding of a new day beginning at sundown instead of sunrise, the celebration of Christ's resurrection begins on Saturday night with the Great Easter Vigil. However, for churches that either have earlier services on Saturday or have their first Easter service on Sunday, Holy Saturday is a time for reflecting on Jesus' burial as the period at the end of the sentence, "Jesus suffered and died."

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Job 14:1–14

Lent began on Ash Wednesday with a reminder of our mortality. So on the day after Jesus' death do we read from Job a lament of human mortality.

OR Lamentations 3:1–9, 19–24

In the midst of his anguish on the cross, Jesus cried out a line from Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" That same sense of experiencing God as refusing to hear the prayers of one afflicted is expressed in today's reading from Lamentations. However, the second section names the hope of the faithful, that God's steadfast love will overcome God's wrath.

Psalm 31:1–4, 15–16

At the beginning of this week, the church read a portion of Psalm 31 in which the one praying asks God for protection in the face of suffering. We return to a different section of that psalm again at the end of the week to extend that prayer for refuge.

1 Peter 4:1–8

In our passage from 1 Peter, a letter we will read much from during the season of Easter, the author instructs his readers that they must be prepared to suffer for the faith as Christ suffered for them. The author then makes a claim that later shows up in some creedal expressions—that is, that after his death, Christ descended to hell to proclaim the good news to the dead.

Matthew 27:57–66

Our Gospel reading for today tells a story that appears only in Matthew's Gospel. After Jesus is buried, the religious authorities seek to place guards at the tomb so that the disciples cannot steal his body and fake a resurrection.

OR John 19:38–42

Early in Lent, we heard of Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night and learning what it means to be born from above. In an element unique to John's Gospel, Nicodemus returns to join Joseph of Arimathea in burying Jesus.

Easter

Year A

Introduction for Easter

The Season of Easter (often called Eastertide or The Great Fifty Days) is the theological center of the liturgical year. It begins with the Easter Vigil on Saturday evening and continues fifty days until Pentecost. In sum, the season is a celebration of Christ's resurrection, the events that proceed from the resurrection (discovery of the empty tomb, appearances of the risen Christ, the ascension, and the gift of the Holy Spirit), the beginnings of the post-resurrection church (as narrated in the Acts of the Apostles), and the theological and existential implications of the resurrection for a life of faith.

Introduction for Easter Vigil, Year A

In ancient times, the church held a vigil through the night to await the dawn of Easter on Sunday morning. When the sun arose, “Alleluias” that had been silenced during the time of preparation were sung once again, and catechumens were baptized. While few churches continue the practice of praying through the entire night, the Great Vigil is still held by many congregations (often ending after midnight) and is considered the first service of Easter, similar to the Christmas Eve service being the first service of Christmas.

The Easter Vigil moves symbolically from the darkness of the tomb to the light of the dawn of resurrection. In terms of its use of scripture, the service follows the pattern that has dominated the use of the First Testament throughout Lent in highlighting biblical events that serve as examples of the biblical view of salvation history. In other words, while Christians hold the passion and resurrection of Christ to be the epitome of God’s self-revelatory activity for the church, the readings for this night remind us of the broader theological context that claims God always has been and always will be with us in a way that is redemptive. With the exception of the Gospel lection, the scripture readings for this night are the same every year and have been read on this night for centuries.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

[NOTE: The RCL prescribes that while all of the readings suggested for the Vigil need not be used, at least three readings from the First Testament, one of which should always include the Exodus passage, should be used each year. The introductions below will need to be altered to fit with the choices made. The Psalter readings are offered as responses to the primary lections. If they are not used, the last sentence of the introductions will need to be omitted.]

Genesis 1:1–2:4a (Psalm 136:1–9, 23–26)

As the church traces its sacred history on this glorious night, we begin at the beginning. Our opening reading is a creation litany, declaring that God tamed the chaos to make a good, orderly world. The sections of the psalm we read in response likewise celebrate God’s creative work.

Genesis 7:1–5, 11–18; 8:6–18; 9:8–13 (Psalm 46)

Our next lection consists of short selections from the story of Noah. In these readings we hear of the flood, the subsiding of the water, and the covenant God made with Noah symbolized by the rainbow. This story of the flood is especially appropriate on this night since the church has often called on its imagery of water to artistically interpret baptism. Psalm 46 is used as a response to this story because it proclaims that God will protect God’s people, even in the face of roaring waters.

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Genesis 22:1–18 (Psalm 16)

We move from biblical stories that concern the ancestry of all humankind to those that ground the faith and history of Israel. Earlier during Lent we read of God establishing a covenant with Abraham. Tonight we hear the story of God instructing Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, a story as troubling as it is powerful. We read the story tonight because the early church interpreted it as an allegory about God sacrificing Jesus on the cross. Psalm 16, which is a prayer for protection in a time of distress, is a fitting response to the story of Isaac's near sacrifice.

Exodus 14:10–31; 15:20–21 (Exodus 15:1b–13, 17–18)

The story of the exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea is at the center of Israel's understanding of salvation. As with the story of Noah we read earlier, the water imagery has informed the church's interpretation of baptism as salvation through water. Instead of a psalm related to this story, we read the song Moses sang in response to crossing the Red Sea as our response.

Isaiah 55:1–11 (Isaiah 12:2–6)

With our next reading, the church shifts from Israel's foundational narratives to its prophetic proclamation. In our reading from Isaiah 55, we hear the prophet invite hearers into God's justice using the imagery of a free banquet. Again, the church hears the ripple of its baptismal waters foreshadowed in this passage when the thirsty are invited to the waters. Our responsive reading is not a psalm but an earlier passage from Isaiah celebrating God's deliverance in terms of drawing water from the wells of salvation.

Proverbs 8:1–8, 19–21; 9:4b–6 (Psalm 19)

Our next reading celebrates the wisdom tradition of the First Testament. Wisdom found in the midst of nature and life is a gift from God that offers life and redemption. In one line, resonating with the church's sacramental practice, wisdom personified as a woman invites hearers to a meal of bread and wine. Psalm 19, which celebrates the manner in which nature reveals God, serves as the response to the reading from Proverbs.

Ezekiel 36:24–28 (Psalms 42—43)

The prophet Ezekiel had argued that the exile to Babylon and the destruction of Jerusalem were acts of God's judgment. But after the judgment comes restoration. In our reading from Ezekiel 36, the prophet speaks of God's promise to return the exiles to their home in Judea and to purify them for God's sake. Psalms 42 and 43, the responsorial psalms for the Ezekiel reading, originally comprised a single prayer for help when oppression gives one the experience of being abandoned by God.

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Ezekiel 37:1–14 (Psalm 143)

Our second lesson from Ezekiel, which we read earlier on the Fifth Sunday in Lent, is a prophetic vision of the resurrection of the land and people of Israel after the Babylonian exile. It declares that God alone can give new life to dry bones. Psalm 143 serves as a response to Ezekiel 37, for in it the psalmist prays with a soul that thirsts like a parched land for deliverance from oppression.

Zephaniah 3:14–20 (Psalm 98)

Although from an earlier day than Ezekiel, the book of Zephaniah also focuses on the judgment Jerusalem will experience. However, tonight's lesson from Zephaniah is the conclusion of the prophetic writing, where the theme changes. Here the prophet calls the reader to rejoice in the fact that restoration and salvation will follow the judgment. Psalm 98 likewise calls the congregation to praise God for the salvation God brings to Israel.

Romans 6:3–11 (Psalm 114)

As did our Epistle readings during Lent, our New Testament reading for tonight comes from Paul's letter to the Romans. In this passage, Paul describes baptism as participating in Christ's death so that we may in turn participate in Christ's resurrection. Using Psalm 114, with its celebration of God delivering the Israelites through the Red Sea, as a response to Paul's description reminds us that baptism links the Christian community to the whole of God's salvation history.

Matthew 28:1–10

Our Gospel reading is the story of the discovery of the empty tomb. In Matthew's version an earthquake occurs at dawn to let the women enter the tomb to see that Jesus is not there, an angel tells them that Jesus has been raised, and Jesus himself appears to promise to meet the disciples back in Galilee.

Introduction for Easter Day, Year A

At the center of Christian theology, experience, and worship is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. On Easter Sunday, “Alleluias” ring out as the church listens again to the story it knows so well—the story of the empty tomb and Jesus’ first resurrection appearance.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Acts 10:34–43

Since ancient times, the church has substituted readings from Acts for First Testament lections during Eastertide. This is appropriate since the resurrection transformed the Jesus movement into the church. Today’s reading comes from the story of Peter preaching to Cornelius’ household, the first Gentile converts. At the core of Peter’s sermon is the apostle’s witness to the resurrection.

Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24

On Palm/Passion Sunday, we read portions from Psalm 118. We return to portions of that psalm, but the line that rings out in the context of Easter is, “I shall not die, but I shall live.” But we should also be aware that the early church repeatedly applied the metaphor of the stone rejected by the builders becoming the chief cornerstone to Christ—especially his rejection and execution by the religious and political leaders and his exaltation to the right hand of God.

Colossians 3:1–4

Colossians 3 deals with the new life Christians have in Christ. Our passage speaks of Christians’ participation in Christ’s resurrection and calls believers to keep their minds on things above.

John 20:1–18

On Easter Sunday every year, we join the women in discovering that the tomb is empty. In John’s version of the story, Peter and the beloved disciple run to the tomb to confirm the women’s findings, and then Mary Magdalene mistakes the risen Christ for a gardener who might have stolen Jesus’ body. This lesson initiates a series of readings from John throughout Eastertide.

OR Matthew 28:1–10

On Easter Sunday every year, we join the women in discovering that the tomb is empty. In Matthew’s version of the story, an earthquake occurs at dawn to let the women enter the tomb to see that Jesus is not there, an angel tells them that Jesus has been raised, and Jesus himself appears and promises to meet the disciples back in Galilee.

Introduction for Easter Evening, Year A

[NOTE: Few Protestant Churches hold worship services on Easter evening. However, similar to the pattern we found for Christmas Eve/Day with three sets of propers, the Revised Common Lectionary offers readings for the Easter Vigil, Easter morning, and Easter evening. While the set of readings for Easter evening was not given primary consideration in the cumulative preaching strategies, introductions are provided here for churches that might wish to use these readings.]

The Easter story begins with the discovery of the empty tomb, but the risen Jesus appears to his followers a number of times after that. Luke tells of Jesus appearing to two followers on the road leading from Jerusalem to Emmaus late on that first day of the week. The other readings for the evening support the Gospel story by placing Jesus' breaking the bread with these disciples in the context of the symbolic import of the exodus and the Passover meal.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Isaiah 25:6–9

Although we replace First Testament readings with lections from Acts on the Sunday mornings in Eastertide, this evening we return to Isaiah. Resonating with the Gospel story in which Jesus is made known in the breaking of the bread, the prophet offers a vision of a great feast of salvation in which death is swallowed up forever.

Psalm 114

Reminding us that God's redemptive act in the resurrection is part of God's acts of salvation throughout history, Psalm 114 takes us back to a Hebraic celebration of God delivering the Israelites through the Red Sea.

1 Corinthians 5:6b–8

Our short Epistle reading comes from a longer section of the letter to the Corinthian house churches in which Paul is dealing with issues of sexual morality. These few verses are used on Easter evening because, in Paul's call for Christians to reject the evil of their past and embrace the new creation for which Christ was sacrificed, he compares this participation in the new thing God has done to sharing in the unleavened bread of the Passover feast.

Luke 24:13–49

Our Gospel reading for this evening is Luke's account of Jesus' resurrection appearances on Easter evening. Central to the story is the scene in which two disciples, who had not recognized the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus, come to know him in the breaking of the bread. Luke uses this story to transform the somber last supper into a joyful resurrection meal.

Introduction for Easter 2A

On the first three Sundays of Easter, the church remembers the risen Christ appearing to followers. Although we do not celebrate Pentecost until the last day of Eastertide, today we hear John's version of the risen Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit on the disciples. Thus even before the Day of Pentecost, Eastertide is a celebration of the post-resurrection, Spirit-filled church.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Acts 2:14a, 22–32

Acts 2 is Luke's story of Pentecost. Although we do not read the portion in which God sends the Holy Spirit to the church until the end of this season, we listen today to the portion of Peter's Pentecost sermon in which he proclaims Christ's resurrection.

Psalm 16

Psalm 16 is an individual's prayer for protection in a time of distress. Appropriate to the season of Easter is the line that God does not give us up to Sheol, the place of the dead, but instead shows us the path of life.

1 Peter 1:3–9

During Eastertide this year, our Epistle readings proceed from portions of 1 Peter. The letter was written in the late first century to comfort Christians who were experiencing social ostracism because of their faith. Today's passage comes from the opening to the letter, in which the author calls the readers to rejoice in their new birth in Christ's resurrection in spite of their suffering.

John 20:19–31

If John 20:1–18 was read on Easter Sunday:

Last Sunday we read John's story of the discovery of the empty tomb on Easter morning. Today, as we do every year on the Second Sunday of Easter, we read his account of what happened that evening when he appeared to the disciples and breathed on them the Holy Spirit. Thomas, however, was missing on Easter evening, and wanted the same experience of the risen Jesus the others had.

If Matthew 28:1–10 was read on Easter Sunday:

Last Sunday we read Matthew's version of the discovery of the empty tomb. Today we shift to John's Gospel, where we will remain for most of Eastertide. Today we also shift from the story of Easter morning to the story of Easter evening, when the risen Jesus appeared to the disciples and breathed on them the Holy Spirit. Thomas, however, was missing on Easter evening, and wanted the same experience of the risen Jesus the others had. This is the Gospel reading for the Second Sunday of Easter every year.

Introduction for Easter 3A

On the first three Sundays of Easter, the church remembers the risen Christ appearing to followers. Today's Gospel lesson is the story of Jesus' appearing to disciples on the road to Emmaus on Easter evening. Jesus is revealed to them in the breaking of bread.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Acts 2:14a, 36–41

Last week we read from Acts a portion of Peter's Pentecost sermon in which he proclaims the resurrection of Christ. This week we hear the crowd's response to that sermon.

Psalm 116:1–4, 12–19

Appropriate to the themes of Eastertide, Psalm 116 is a prayer of thanksgiving to God for delivering the psalmist from the threat of death.

1 Peter 1:17–23

Throughout Eastertide this year, we are reading from 1 Peter, which was written to comfort Christians who were experiencing severe economic and social ostracism because of their faith. In today's passage, the author encourages the readers, in the face of their suffering, to maintain a level of moral and ethical behavior appropriate to the purification they experienced in Christ.

Luke 24:13–35

Last week's Gospel reading was John's version of Jesus appearing to the disciples on the evening of Easter. Today we read Luke's account of Easter evening, which is quite a different story. Two disciples on the road to Emmaus fail to recognize the risen Jesus until they see him in the breaking of the bread.

Introduction for Easter 4A

The first three Sundays of Easter focus on Jesus' resurrection appearances, and the last three focus on Jesus preparing his disciples for his departure and the gift of the Spirit. The Fourth Sunday of Easter, lying as a transition between these two foci, is "Good Shepherd Sunday," because the Gospel reading for the day is always drawn from John 10, in which Jesus uses various shepherding metaphors to describe his mission.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Acts 2:42–47

Over the past two weeks, our readings from Acts have dealt with Peter's Pentecost sermon and the response to that sermon. Today we listen to a summary of the church's communal life under the pastoral leadership of the apostles just after Pentecost.

Psalm 23

On the day we celebrate Christ as our Good Shepherd, we read the familiar psalm that declares the Lord as our shepherd.

1 Peter 2:19–25

Our Epistle readings for Eastertide continue to be drawn from 1 Peter. In today's lection, the readers are told that God honors the fact that they are suffering unjustly for their faith as Christ suffered unjustly for their sins. Indeed, fitting for today, Jesus' suffering and death are described in terms of sheep gone astray being returned to the shepherd of their souls.

John 10:1–10

Each year on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, the Gospel reading is taken from John 10, which utilizes a variety of metaphors drawn from shepherding practices of Jesus' day. This year the lesson is the opening passage of the discourse, in which Jesus claims that he is the gate to the sheepfold.

Introduction for Easter 5A

The first three Sundays of Easter focus on Jesus' resurrection appearances. The Fourth Sunday is Good Shepherd Sunday. And then, as the church nears the commemoration of Ascension and Pentecost, the last three Sundays focus on Jesus preparing his disciples for his departure.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Acts 7:55–60

According to Acts, Stephen was one of the seven chosen to assist the twelve apostles in the work of the church. The religious authorities arrested him. When given the chance to defend himself, he preached a sermon that summarized events of salvation in the history of Israel and located Jesus within that history. This resulted in Stephen becoming the first Christian martyr. However, as he was being stoned, he had a vision of the resurrected and exalted Christ.

Psalm 31:1–5, 15–16

Psalm 31 is used as a response to the story of the stoning of Stephen because it is a prayer for deliverance from the hands of persecutors.

1 Peter 2:2–10

A key biblical text for the early church, and one that we read on Easter Sunday, is the line from Psalm 118 that claims the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. As we continue to read from 1 Peter, we hear the author quote this line as he calls the readers to be a holy priesthood.

John 14:1–14

[NOTE: This introduction should be modified if the Ascension lections are substituted for the Easter 7 readings.]

For the three Sundays of Eastertide leading up to Pentecost, the church reads from John's account of Jesus' farewell discourse to the disciples before his death. This may seem odd given that we have already commemorated Jesus' death and resurrection. But for John, the glorification of which Jesus speaks at his "departure" involves his death, resurrection, *and* exaltation.

Introduction for Easter 6A

As the church nears the celebrations of Ascension and Pentecost, Eastertide focuses on Jesus' preparing his disciples for his departure and the gift of the Spirit.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Acts 17:22–31

The readings from Acts throughout Eastertide have focused on the early church's proclamation—Peter's sermon to Cornelius' household; Peter's Pentecost sermon and the response to it; and Stephen's martyrdom, which resulted from his sermon summarizing the salvation history of Israel. Today we listen in on Paul as he preaches in Athens, the center of philosophy of the ancient Mediterranean world, and hear how the Gospel was translated into the idiom of the Greco-Roman culture. The climax of the sermon is the closing affirmation of Christ's resurrection.

Psalm 66:8–20

Some ancient Christian manuscripts of the Bible labeled Psalm 66, "a psalm of resurrection," because it speaks of new life after trials and tribulations. It is a song of thanksgiving and praise for redemption.

1 Peter 3:13–22

As we draw near to the feast of the Ascension, 1 Peter takes us back to the time between Jesus' death and resurrection. As the author continues to offer comfort and encouragement to readers who are facing social persecution because of their faith, he enigmatically claims that when he was dead in the flesh, Jesus preached to the spirits in prison.

John 14:15–21

As with last week's Gospel reading, this week we read from Jesus' farewell discourse in the Fourth Gospel. In this passage John presents Jesus as promising his disciples that God will send the Holy Spirit when he departs.

Introduction for Ascension, Year A

The Feast of the Ascension as a distinct liturgical celebration set forty days after Easter Sunday dates back at least to the fifth century. The story, doctrine, and liturgical celebration of the Ascension are paradoxical. On the one hand, it celebrates with great fanfare the exaltation of Jesus Christ to the right hand of God. On the other hand, the story names the fact that the resurrected Jesus is not present with the church in the same manner that he was present with the apostles. This is a day for grand celebration mixed with a subtle hint of melancholy. The readings for this holy day are the same every year.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Acts 1:1–11

During most of the church year, the Gospel reading is the primary liturgical focus of the set of readings for any particular Sunday. But on Ascension and Pentecost, the readings from Acts take center stage. Today's lesson is the opening passage of Luke's second volume and tells of Jesus promising that God will send the Holy Spirit to the disciples, and then departing into heaven forty days after the resurrection.

Psalm 47

The doctrine that Jesus ascended to the right hand of God declares Christ's sovereignty over the world that now serves as a footstool. Psalm 47 likewise celebrates the power and majesty of God, who rules over all the earth.

Ephesians 1:15–23

The author of the letter to the Ephesians uses hymnic language in describing Christ's exaltation to heaven. While this exaltation foreshadows the *future* subjugation of the principalities and powers that rule the world unjustly, it indicates that Christ is the head of the church now and always.

Luke 24:44–53

Luke ends his Gospel the same way he begins his book of Acts—by telling of Christ's ascension. However, while the same hand pens the books of Luke and Acts, they do not tell exactly the same ascension story. Our Gospel lesson complements the reading from Acts.

Introduction for Easter 7A

The seventh Sunday of Easter lies between the celebration of Ascension (forty days after Easter) and Pentecost (fifty days after Easter). The themes of both holy days shape the scripture readings for today.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Acts 1:6–14

Our reading from Acts tells of Jesus' ascension into heaven forty days after the resurrection. By reading this on the Sunday before Pentecost, the church is invited to join the disciples in Luke's narrative in awaiting God's promise to send the Holy Spirit upon them.

Psalm 68:1–10, 32–35

Psalm 68 is a song of celebration and praise for God's military victories on behalf of Israel. However, the excerpts we read today—the opening and closing verses of the psalm—are hymns of praise of a more general nature. The concluding verses are especially noteworthy, for the image of God as the rider in the heavens is meant to complement the story of Christ ascending into heaven.

1 Peter 4:12–14; 5:6–11

We read one last time from 1 Peter, and the passage comes from the letter's closing section. Once again, the author encourages the readers to persevere in their sufferings, knowing that in doing so they participate in Christ's sufferings and share a common circumstance with Christians throughout the world. Especially important for the Sunday before Pentecost is the author's claim that to be reviled by others for the sake of the Gospel is to be blessed by the Spirit of God.

John 17:1–11

Jesus closes his farewell discourse to the disciples with a prayer for the disciples. As he prepares to depart to be with God, he prays that God may protect and unify them.

Introduction for Pentecost, Year A

Pentecost is the climax of the liturgical seasons of the Christian year. It is the last day of Eastertide and serves as the red exclamation point to the white sentence proclaiming that Christ is risen indeed. More broadly speaking, from Advent's expectation of the coming of God-in-Christ, to Christmas and Epiphany's celebration of the nativity and of God's self-revelation in Christ, through Lent's fast and Easter's celebration of resurrection and baptism, we now arrive at the conclusion of the liturgical retelling of the Christ Event—the gift of the Holy Spirit and birth of the church.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Acts 2:1–21

Through most of the time from Advent to Pentecost, the Gospel reading is the primary liturgical focus of the sets of lections for each Sunday. But on Ascension and Pentecost, the readings from Acts take center stage. On Ascension we listened as Luke told of Jesus' departure. Today we hear of the coming of the Holy Spirit to fill the gap of Jesus' departure.

Psalm 104:24–34, 35b

Psalm 104 is a lengthy hymn of praise to God as creator. The portion we read today speaks of God creating by sending forth God's spirit or breath—language that reminds us of the opening lines of the creation story in Genesis 1, in which the wind or spirit of God swept over the face of the waters.

1 Corinthians 12:3b–13

The Corinthian church was divided over social, economic, and theological issues. On the day that we celebrate the gift of the Spirit to the church, we listen to Paul address the Corinthian division over spiritual gifts. Against those who would favor speaking in tongues as the greatest gift, Paul reminds the Corinthians that all gifts come from the same Spirit, making the church the one body of Christ.

John 2:19–23

On the Second Sunday of Easter we read John's account of Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit upon his disciples on the evening of the resurrection. We return to that story today to hold John and Luke's versions of the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church together so that we might hear their distinctive voices.

OR John 7:37–39

In our reading from the Gospel of John, we hear Jesus early in his ministry invite those who would listen to come to him to drink of the living water. The narrator makes clear that Jesus is foretelling the gift of the Holy Spirit that will follow his glorification and departure—his death, resurrection, and exaltation.

Ordinary Time (Season after Pentecost) Year A

[NOTE: Since the Sundays in Ordinary Time have no central thematic focus, broad introductions for each Sunday are not included as they are for Advent through Pentecost, except on special days (e.g., Trinity Sunday). Instead, for each Sunday, only introductions for the individual lections are called for.]

Introduction for Ordinary Time

The church year is divided into liturgical time and ordinary time. Liturgical time proceeds from Advent, through Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, and Easter to Pentecost and is structured loosely around the progression of the story of the Christ Event. Ordinary Time encompasses the other half of the year and has no specific thematic foci that shape Sunday worship.

Our congregation, and all congregations and denominations that use a lectionary for each Sunday and holy day in a three-year cycle, will notice a shift in the way the scripture readings function in worship as liturgical time gives way to the Season after Pentecost. During the liturgical seasons, the lections are chosen to serve the thematic needs of those seasons. During Ordinary Time, however, the scripture lessons are not subordinated to such liturgical needs, with the exception of a special day here and there (e.g., Trinity Sunday, All Saints', and the Reign of Christ).

The result is that the three primary sets of readings (First Testament, Epistles, and Gospels) are read in a semicontinuous fashion during this season. This year the readings exhibit the following patterns:

First Testament: These readings come from narratives that lead to the constitution of the people of Israel as a nation—primarily Genesis and Exodus, with a few readings from Deuteronomy, Joshua, and Judges. The Psalter readings are usually responsive to the First Testament lections, just as in liturgical time.

Epistles: For most of the Sundays after Pentecost, the Epistle lessons are drawn from Paul's letter to the Romans. After working through Romans, we turn to Philipians and 1 Thessalonians.

Gospel: As with liturgical time since Advent, the church continues to read in the Gospel of Matthew. During the Sundays after Epiphany we read through portions of the Sermon on the Mount. Our lessons pick up at that point and move us through much of the narrative of Jesus' ministry.

Introduction for Trinity Sunday, Year A

[First Sunday after Pentecost]

The designation of the Sunday after Pentecost as a liturgical celebration of the Trinity originated some seven hundred years ago and was raised in prominence in the early twentieth century. The doctrine of the Trinity arose after the biblical period, primarily as a result of different groups debating in what way Jesus is or became divine and thus his relation to the Eternal Creator. Although the doctrine of the Trinity is not to be found in the Bible, the belief is built on biblical language of Father/Creator, Son/Redeemer, and Spirit.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Genesis 1:1—2:4a

During the Season after Pentecost this year, our First Testament readings will be taken from the narratives that tell how Israel became a nation in covenant relation with God. It is appropriate to begin with creation, the divine act from which all peoples spring. This particular passage is a traditional choice for Trinity Sunday because God says, “Let *us* make humankind in *our* image.”

Psalm 8

Echoing our lection from Genesis, Psalm 8 is a hymn of praise celebrating God’s creation and the glory God assigned to humanity within the created order.

2 Corinthians 13:11–13

Today’s Epistle reading is the closing greeting from 2 Corinthians. Paul concludes the letter with a benediction that uses Trinitarian language.

Matthew 28:16–20

According to Matthew, during Jesus’ lifetime he sent out his disciples only to minister to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. After his resurrection, however, he sent them to make disciples of *all* nations. The Gospel lesson for today is called the great commission and is read on Trinity Sunday because of the instruction to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Proper 4A

[Sunday between May 29 and June 4 inclusive (if after Trinity Sunday)]

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Genesis 6:9–22; 7:24; 8:14–19

Last week we read the creation story from Genesis 1. This week our First Testament lection is a composite of passages taken from the story of the flood, which in essence served as a second creation.

Psalm 46

In response to the story of the flood, our Psalter reading for today is an expression of confidence in God's providence, even though the waters roar and foam.

Romans 1:16–17; 3:22b–28 (29–31)

The Epistle lessons for Ordinary Time begin with Paul's letter to the Romans. Romans is probably the last letter Paul wrote, coming from about 55 C.E. Paul felt his ministry to the Gentiles around the Mediterranean was drawing to a close and wished to come to the church at Rome so that they might sponsor him on a mission to the west and to Spain. Thus he wrote this letter as sort of a preview of his message. This opening lection from Romans defines the major theme of the letter: salvation for Jews and Gentiles alike.

Matthew 7:21–29

Since Advent, Matthew has been the primary Gospel from which we have read. Indeed, during the Season after Epiphany, we began reading through the Gospel of Matthew in order. Specifically, we spent a number of Sundays working through the Sermon on the Mount, which serves as Jesus' opening speech in Matthew. Today's Gospel lesson is the closing to that model speech.

Proper 5A

[Sunday between June 5 and June 11 inclusive (if after Trinity Sunday)]

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Genesis 12:1–9

The first eleven chapters of Genesis tell stories related to beginnings of all people. In chapter 12 the focus shifts specifically to the origins of Israel. For the next few weeks, we will read from the cycle of stories concerning Abraham and Sarah. Today's lesson opens that cycle with God calling Abram (whose name has not yet been changed to Abraham) to leave his father's house so that God might make a great nation from him.

Psalms 33:1–12

Psalms 33 is a song of praise for God as creator and ruler over history. The portion of the psalm we read today concludes with a blessing over the nations whose God is the Lord. This echoes our First Testament reading in which God promises to make a nation from Abram.

Romans 4:13–25

Last week we began reading from Paul's letter to the Romans and listened to the declaration of the good news of salvation to both Jew and Gentile—to all who have faith. In today's Epistle lesson, Paul unpacks this claim by interpreting Abraham as the example of justification by faith, of God rectifying the relationship between humanity and God.

Matthew 9:9–13, 18–26

Today's Gospel lection is actually two different passages. In the first Jesus declares that he comes to make sinners whole. In the second he heals a woman and raises a girl from the dead. For Matthew, healing stories are symbolic of God's saving grace offered through Christ.

Proper 6A

[Sunday between June 12 and June 18 inclusive (if after Trinity Sunday)]

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Genesis 18:1–5; (21:1–7)

Although God had promised that a great nation would come from Abraham and Sarah, they had no children. Sarah and Abraham had conspired so that he had a son, Ishmael, by their slave Hagar. In today's reading, however, God reiterates the covenant with the elderly couple by promising that Sarah would give birth soon.

Psalms 116:1–2, 12–19

Psalms 116 is a prayer of thanksgiving offered in response to God's deliverance from a life-threatening situation. In the excerpt we read today, the one offering the prayer fulfills the vow promised when the prayer for deliverance was first uttered.

Romans 5:1–8

For the last two weeks, our Epistle readings have been passages from Romans in which Paul describes salvation as justification by faith. In today's reading, the apostle interprets justification as the reconciliation of humanity to God through Christ, who died for us while we were yet sinners.

Matthew 9:35—10:8 (9–23)

Matthew organizes Jesus' teaching into five discourses. The first is the Sermon on the Mount. Today's Gospel reading opens the second, the missionary discourse, from which we will read for the next three weeks. Here Jesus chooses the twelve apostles from among his many disciples and sends them to heal and proclaim the reign of God to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Proper 7A

[Sunday between June 19 and June 25 inclusive (if after Trinity Sunday)]

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Genesis 21:8–21

After Sarah and Abraham gave birth to Isaac, they decided to send away their slave Hagar and the son she bore to Abraham. But God is with Hagar and Ishmael and promises that a great nation will come from Ishmael just as one will from Isaac.

Psalms 86:1–10, 16–17

Our First Testament lection portrayed Hagar and Ishmael as facing possible death after their expulsion from Abraham's household. But God is with them and protects them. Similarly, today's Psalter reading is a prayer for help in a time of serious trouble.

Romans 6:1b–11

In the opening chapters of Romans, from which we have read for the last few weeks, Paul described salvation as justification through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. In the next few chapters, Paul unpacks the meaning of this claim for the Christian life by posing hypothetical questions and then answering them. In today's Epistle lection, Paul asks whether the fact that salvation is a free gift means we should continue to sin so that God can continue to be merciful.

Matthew 10:24–39

Matthew organizes Jesus' teaching primarily into five discourses. Last week we read the opening of the second discourse, the missionary discourse. Jesus chose the twelve apostles and sent them out healing and preaching. Today's Gospel lesson comes from later in the discourse, when Jesus warns those that he sends out that those who minister to the world in Jesus' name will face persecution—as did Jesus.

Proper 8A

[Sunday between June 26 and July 2 inclusive]

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Genesis 22:1–14

Last week, our First Testament passage was the story of Sarah and Abraham sending away their slave Hagar and the son she bore to Abraham after they had had a son of their own. In today's troubling text, however, that son, Isaac, is put in jeopardy as God instructs Abraham to sacrifice him to the Lord.

Psalm 13

In our First Testament lection, Abraham trusts God so much that he is willing to face the horror of sacrificing his own son. Similarly, Psalm 13 is a prayer for help that ends with an expression of trust in God's steadfast love.

Romans 6:12–23

In last Sunday's Epistle lesson, Paul asked whether the fact that salvation is a free gift from God means we should continue to sin so that God can continue to be merciful. His answer was that to do so is to misinterpret the power of the human condition to enslave us. In today's reading from Romans, Paul continues this line of reasoning.

Matthew 10:40–42

For the past two weeks our Gospel lections have been taken from Matthew's missionary discourse. Jesus teaches the twelve apostles, and the church, about ministry. Last week we read a scripture in which Jesus spoke of persecution as the cost of ministry in his name. Today's reading is the closing passage of the discourse, in which Jesus speaks of hospitality to Jesus as the reward of ministry.

Proper 9A

[Sunday between July 3 and July 9 inclusive]

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Genesis 24:34–38, 42–49, 58–67

For the last few weeks, our First Testament readings have dealt with the birth and early years of Isaac, the son of Sarah and Abraham. In this week's lection Isaac is older, and Abraham sends a servant back to the land of his kin to find a wife for Isaac. God directs the servant to Rebekah at a local watering hole.

Psalm 45:10–17

In response to the First Testament lesson's focus on the marriage of Isaac, today's Psalter reading comes from a psalm celebrating a royal wedding.

OR Song of Solomon 2:8–13

Today we substitute a passage from the Song of Solomon for the Psalter reading. The Song of Solomon is a poetic dialogue between two young lovers. This is an appropriate responsive reading for the First Testament lesson's focus on the marriage of Isaac. In today's reading, the young man appears at his lover's window at dawn and calls her to go away with him.

Romans 7:15–25a

In our readings from Romans for the last two weeks, Paul has been describing the human condition as slavery to sin. In today's lection, he continues interpreting the human condition in terms of people's inability to do the good they wish to do. But the passage ends with an acclamation of God's ability to save us from our inability.

Matthew 11:16–19, 25–30

Today's Gospel lection combines three different sayings of Jesus. The first condemns the "present generation" for rejecting both the ministries of John the Baptist and of Jesus. The second is a prayer in which Jesus gives thanks that God has hidden the Gospel from the wise and revealed it to the simple. The third, then, is a promise of comfort to those who have heavy burdens.

Proper 10A

[Sunday between July 10 and July 16 inclusive]

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Genesis 25:19–34

Last week we read of the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah. This week our First Testament lection focuses on their children, Esau and Jacob. As God's blessing passed from Abraham to Isaac, so would it pass from Isaac to the next generation. At stake in this reading is the question of which son will inherit that blessing.

Psalm 119:105–112

While our First Testament lection was the story of Jacob and Esau's struggle over their inheritance, the excerpt we read from Psalm 119 celebrates God's torah as our inheritance.

Romans 8:1–11

In last week's reading from Romans, Paul interpreted the human condition in terms of our inability to do the good we will. In this week's lection, Paul explains that God's solution to this dilemma is the gift of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that makes new life in Christ possible.

Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23

Matthew organizes Jesus' teaching into five primary discourses. The first is the Sermon on the Mount. The second is the missionary discourse. The third discourse is a collection of Jesus' parables of the reign of God. Today's Gospel lection is the opening of the parable discourse. Jesus tells the parable of the sower and then offers an allegorical interpretation of the parable.

Proper 11A

[Sunday between July 17 and July 23 inclusive]

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Genesis 28:10–19a

In last week's First Testament lesson, Jacob tricked Esau out of the birthright that was his as the firstborn son of Isaac. Later he also tricked Isaac into giving him the blessing he intended for Esau. The tense situation forces Jacob to flee to the homeland of his mother Rebekah. Today's reading is set during that journey at a place where Jacob receives a vision of God's presence.

Psalm 139:1–12, 23–24

Jacob fled from Esau, but God was still with him. Psalm 139 is a prayer seeking help from God, who is ever-present and all-knowing.

Romans 8:12–25

In last week's Epistle lection, Paul claimed that God's solution to human inability to live for the good is the gift of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that makes new life in Christ possible. This week's reading from Romans extends the argument about the present gift of the Spirit to the future redemption of the whole of creation.

Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43

Last week we began reading from Jesus' third speech in Matthew, the parable discourse. Today's Gospel lesson is the parable in which the reign of God is compared to a field in which weeds grow in the midst of the wheat.

Proper 12A

[Sunday between July 24 and July 30 inclusive]

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections for Proper 12A

Genesis 29:15–28

In last week's First Testament lection, we learned that Jacob fled from his brother Esau for fear of his life. He fled to his mother's homeland. Like his father before him, it is there, in the household of his uncle, that he seeks a wife.

Psalm 105:1–11, 45b

Psalm 105 is a celebration of God's providential care for the nation of Israel. In the excerpt we read today, the psalmist celebrates that God has passed a covenant from generation to generation, from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob.

Or Psalm 128

In response to the story of Jacob marrying Leah and Rachel, our Psalter reading is a man's celebration of the blessing of wife and children.

Romans 8:26–39

For a number of weeks, we have been reading from the first half of Paul's letter to the Romans, which offers an interpretation of Paul's understanding of salvation in Christ. Today's Epistle lesson draws this section to a close with a poetic celebration of the infinite extent of God's love.

Matthew 13:31–33, 44–52

For the past two weeks, we have been reading from Matthew's parable discourse. Today's lection comes from the end of the discourse. The lesson is a collection of several short parables.

Proper 13A

[Sunday between July 31 and August 6 inclusive]

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Genesis 32:22–31

Last Sunday we read the story of Laban tricking Jacob into marrying both of his daughters after Jacob had fled from his brother Esau. Our lection for today proceeds from the story in which Jacob determines to return home to his brother many years later. As he had a vision of God on his journey away from home, so does he meet God on the way back. But this time he wrestles a blessing from the Lord.

Psalms 17:1–7, 15

As Jacob sought a blessing from God, so does the psalmist seek God's help. An innocent person asking for divine deliverance from worldly danger offers the prayer.

Romans 9:1–5

Thus far in Ordinary Time, our Epistle readings have been drawn from the first half of Romans, in which Paul spelled out his understanding of justification through Christ offered to Gentiles as well as Jews. In the lections for the next three weeks, we read from a new section of the letter in which Paul unpacks what that theology means for God's promise to Israel as a people. In today's lesson, Paul represents the traditional view that Israel has a unique covenantal relationship with God.

Matthew 14:13–21

Today's reading from Matthew follows on the heels of the story of Herod having John the Baptist beheaded. When Jesus heard the tragic news he withdrew to be alone, but a crowd followed him. Our Gospel lection tells of Jesus healing and feeding those in the crowd.

Proper 14A

[Sunday between August 7 and August 13 inclusive]

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Genesis 37:1–4, 12–28

For the last four weeks, we have been reading from the Jacob cycle in Genesis. Today we shift our focus to stories that deal with his son Joseph. These stories will take us from Canaan to Egypt. They will take us from prosperity to slavery.

Psalm 105:1–6, 16–22, 45b

Psalm 105 celebrates God's providential care for the nation of Israel. A couple of Sundays ago we read from the section of this psalm that recalls the passing of the covenant from generation to generation. In the excerpt we read today, the psalmist celebrates that God saved Israel from famine through Joseph being sold into slavery in Egypt.

Romans 10:5–15

Last week we began reading Paul's explanation of what his theology of justification means for God's promise to Israel as a people. In today's lesson from Romans, Paul makes clear that God's unique covenantal relationship with Israel does not mean that salvation is not for all.

Matthew 14:22–33

Last week we read the story of Jesus miraculously feeding a crowd of five thousand even though he was trying to withdraw to be alone after hearing of the death of John the Baptist. After sending the disciples away by boat, Jesus finally gets to withdraw in prayer. Today's lection is the story of Jesus catching up with the disciples by walking on water.

Proper 15A

[Sunday between August 14 and August 20 inclusive]

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections for Proper 15A

Genesis 45:1–15

Last week we read of Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers. But in Egypt, Joseph's ability to interpret the pharaoh's dream about a coming famine helped him rise to an important level of leadership. The famine also hit Canaan, and Joseph's father sent his brothers to Egypt to seek help. But they did not realize that the one with whom they pleaded was their brother Joseph. In today's reading, Joseph reveals himself to his family.

Psalm 133

Our First Testament lesson narrated the reunion of Joseph and his family. Today's Psalm 133 is a proper response to this story in that it is a wisdom poem opening with a line celebrating the unity of kin.

Romans 11:1–2a, 29–32

For the last two weeks we have been reading excerpts from Paul's thoughts on what his theology of justification for all means for the traditional view that God has a unique relationship with Israel. In today's reading from Romans 11, Paul makes clear that he does not believe the emergence of the church means God has rejected Israel. Indeed, Paul believes that in God's future, all of Israel will be saved.

Matthew 15:(10–20) 21–28

The Gospels are filled with stories in which someone confronts Jesus with a request, a question, or a challenge. The focal point of the story is Jesus' reply, or pronouncement. But in today's Gospel lection, that pattern is turned on its head as a Gentile woman changes Jesus' mind.

Proper 16A

[Sunday between August 21 and August 27 inclusive]

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Exodus 1:8—2:10

Last week our final reading from Genesis told of how Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel, and his children came to dwell in Egypt thanks to the role his son Joseph played in the Egyptian government. This week's reading from Exodus opens years later with the memory of Joseph lost and the Israelites enslaved by Pharaoh.

Psalm 124

As we begin reading through the narrative of the exodus, Psalm 124 reminds us of God's deliverance of Israel from their enemies.

Romans 12:1–8

After the main body and argument of Paul's letters, the apostle adds a section of moral exhortation. Today's Epistle lection is the opening paragraph of this ethical section from Romans. Paul calls his readers to present themselves as acceptable to God through reasonable worship, renewal of their minds, and the humility of recognizing their place in the community of faith.

Matthew 16:13–20

Today's Gospel lesson represents a key moment in the Gospel of Matthew. While the world is confused about Jesus' true identity, the disciples are not. Peter offers for Matthew's readers the exemplary declaration of who Jesus is, a central profession of the Christian faith.

Proper 17A

[Sunday between August 28 and September 3 inclusive]

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Exodus 3:1–15

Last week we read how his mother, his sister, and Pharaoh's daughter saved the infant Moses. After being raised in Pharaoh's household, Moses killed an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave and was forced to flee Egypt. He settled in Midian, but God did not allow him to maintain the simple life of a shepherd for long. Today's First Testament lection is Moses' encounter with God in the burning bush on Mount Horeb.

Psalms 105:1–6, 23–26, 45c

Psalms 105 celebrates God's providential care for the nation of Israel. In past weeks we have read portions of the psalm telling of God passing God's covenant from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob and of God using Joseph's enslavement to save Israel from famine. In the excerpt we read today, the psalmist remembers the growing strength of Israel while enslaved in Egypt.

Romans 12:9–21

Paul's letters always include a significant amount of moral exhortation that follows the main body of the letter. In today's reading from Romans 12, Paul offers a series of short instructions. What holds the list together is the focus on social relationships.

Matthew 16:21–28

Last week our Gospel lection was the story in which Peter declares Jesus to be the Christ, the child of the living God. In this week's reading, Jesus follows up Peter's declaration by foretelling of his passion and resurrection. He then goes on to interpret what his death means for discipleship.

Proper 18A

[Sunday between September 4 and September 10 inclusive]

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Exodus 12:1–14

When God sent Moses back to Egypt to struggle prophetically for the release of the Israelite slaves, Pharaoh refused Moses' demand. In response, God sent nine plagues upon Egypt, but Pharaoh's heart remained hardened. Thus God decided to send a final plague in which all of the firstborn males of the Egyptians would be killed. Today's reading is the institution of the Passover feast and ritual, which protected the Israelites from the plague that secured their release.

Psalm 149

The Passover and exodus story is the biblical archetype of God's salvation. In response to reading the story of the Passover, we turn to Psalm 149, a call to celebrate God's saving justice.

Romans 13:8–14

For the last two weeks our Epistle readings have been taken from the section of Romans in which Paul offers his readers moral exhortation. In today's lesson, Paul continues his call for a life informed by love, but he raises the stakes by emphasizing that the apocalyptic day of the Lord is near.

Matthew 18:15–20

Matthew organizes Jesus' teaching primarily into five discourses. So far this year, we have read portions of the ethical discourse (or the Sermon on the Mount), the parable discourse, and the missionary discourse. Today we read from the community discourse, in which Matthew presents Jesus as instructing the church on the way it should deal with relationships within the community. In this passage, the issue at stake is how the community disciplines a member of the church who wrongs another.

Proper 19A

[Sunday between September 11 and September 17 inclusive]

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Exodus 14:19–31

After God sent the plague of death on the firstborn males of Egypt, Pharaoh released the Israelites from slavery and allowed them to leave. But then Pharaoh changed his mind and sent his army after them. Today's reading from Exodus 14 narrates the Hebrews miraculous escape from Pharaoh at the Red Sea. This story is central to the understanding of God's salvation throughout the Bible.

Psalms 114

Psalms 114 is a psalm of praise traditionally sung in conjunction with the Jewish celebration of Passover. It commemorates God bringing the people through the Red Sea to escape Egypt and through the Jordan River into the promised land.

Romans 14:1–12

Our series of readings from Romans is drawn to a close today. We have read Paul's interpretation of salvation through Christ, what this salvation means for Israel, and finally the implications of this salvation for the ethical life. Our last lesson continues with Paul's discussion of ethics, but in this passage the apostle's concern is primarily with life and behavior within the community of faith.

Matthew 18:21–35

Matthew organizes Jesus' teaching primarily into five discourses. Last week we began reading from the fourth discourse, which strives to order behavior in the community of faith. The first reading dealt with how to discipline those who wrong others in the church. Today's Gospel lection deals with forgiving those who have wronged you.

Proper 20A

[Sunday between September 18 and September 24 inclusive]

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Exodus 16:2–15

For the last few weeks, our First Testament readings have focused on God saving the Israelites from the oppression under which they lived in Egypt. For most of the rest of the Sundays after Pentecost, our First Testament lessons will deal with the Israelites' journey from Egypt to the promised land, where they will become a nation. Today's reading comes soon after the escape at the Red Sea and portrays the people as grumbling out of hunger. God answers with manna and quail from heaven.

Psalm 105:1–6, 37–45

At different points during the Season after Pentecost, we have turned to Psalm 105 as it echoed the narratives of Genesis and Exodus. Indeed, the psalm is a celebration of God's providential care for the nation of Israel. We have read portions of the psalm recalling God passing God's covenant from Abraham to Isaac and to Jacob; God using Joseph's enslavement to save Israel from famine; and the growing strength of Israel while enslaved in Egypt. Today's excerpt celebrates God providing for the people in the wilderness.

Philippians 1:21–30

For the next four Sundays, our Epistle readings will come from Paul's letter to the Philippians. While Paul was in prison, the church at Philippi sent him a care package by way of a messenger named Epaphroditus. But while he was with Paul, Epaphroditus became seriously ill. Paul writes this letter while he is still in prison in order to send Epaphroditus back to the Philippians after he got well, to thank the church for their gift, and to undergird their faith by assuring them that his faith was holding up under the persecution.

Matthew 20:1–16

Last week, our Gospel lection was the parable of the unforgiving servant. This week we read a parable that compares the reign of God to a vineyard owner who hires day laborers at different times throughout the day and then pays them all the same wage.

Proper 21A

[Sunday between September 25 and October 1 inclusive]

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Exodus 17:1–7

Last week we listened to the Israelites wandering in the wilderness begin to grumble about their hunger. Likewise, in this Sunday's First Testament lection we hear them grumble about thirst. God answers by drawing water from a rock.

Psalms 78:1–4, 12–16

Similar to Psalm 105, from which we have read often this season, Psalm 78 recounts Israel's salvation history from its beginnings to the time of David. The portion we read today celebrates God delivering the Israelite slaves from Egypt and providing for them as they wandered in the wilderness.

Philippians 2:1–13

Last week we began reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians. In today's lesson, Paul calls his readers to seek unity in the church through humility. Indeed he calls them to have the mind of Christ, which is the epitome of humility. Paul illustrates this claim by quoting a hymn that speaks of Christ emptying himself.

Matthew 21:23–32

During Holy Week, we read Gospel passages narrating events that happen during Jesus' last week in Jerusalem. For the rest of Ordinary Time, we will read passages that recount what Jesus taught in those last days in Jerusalem. We begin today with Jesus responding to religious leaders who are challenging the authority by which he teaches.

Proper 22A

[Sunday between October 2 and October 8 inclusive]

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Exodus 20:1–4, 7–9, 12–20

The first stage of the Israelites' travels in the wilderness leads them to Mount Sinai, where God establishes a covenant with the people whom God delivered from Egypt. Central to that covenant is God's gift of the Decalogue—the Ten Commandments—to Israel.

Psalm 19

In response to the story of God giving Israel the torah at Mount Sinai, we turn to Psalm 19, which celebrates God's gifts of creation and torah.

Philippians 3:4b–14

Paul primarily wrote to the Philippians to thank them for the care package they sent him while he was in prison. But the apostle also takes the opportunity to be a pastor to his congregation. In the section from which today's Epistle lection comes, Paul warns his readers about those who argue that Gentiles must be circumcised to become Christian. Part of his argument is that he has much to boast of as a Jew but nothing counts except knowing Christ.

Matthew 21:33–46

Last week we began reading from Jesus' teaching during his final days in Jerusalem. A number of these teachings focus on conflicts with religious authorities in the temple. In today's Gospel lection, Jesus offers the parable of the wicked tenants of the vineyard as an indictment against the religious leaders.

Proper 23A

[Sunday between October 9 and October 15 inclusive]

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Exodus 32:1–14

Last week we read of God giving the Israelites the Ten Commandments as the centerpiece of God's covenant with the people. The next time Moses returned to Mount Sinai he stayed for forty days as God gave him the Torah on two stone tablets. But as the people waited, they became anxious that he was gone for so long, and began to seek comfort in idolatry.

Psalms 106:1–6, 19–23

Psalms 106 is a lengthy prayer, in which Israel confesses its sins throughout history while also offering praise to God for remaining steadfast in God's love throughout that history. The excerpt we read today recalls the story of the golden calf we read in Exodus 32.

Philippians 4:1–9

For the last three weeks our Epistle lessons have been taken from Philippians. In today's reading, Paul is beginning to draw the letter to a close. He instructs two women in the church to seek unity in Christ to overcome their conflict, encourages the church to rejoice in the midst of their hardship, and calls them to keep the faith.

Matthew 22:1–14

For the last two weeks, our Gospel readings have been taken from the scene in which Jesus clashes with the religious authorities in the temple just before his crucifixion. In today's lesson, Jesus tells the parable of the wedding feast as an indictment against those leaders who reject the invitation God offers through Christ. But the story does not end there. It also indicts those who accept the invitation into God's reign, but then take it for granted.

Proper 24A

[Sunday between October 16 and October 22 inclusive]

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Exodus 33:12–23

Last week our First Testament lection was the story of the Israelites worshiping a golden calf when they became scared because Moses had been gone on Mount Sinai for too long. In response God decided not to lead the people toward the promised land since they had abandoned God for an idol. But in today's reading, Moses persuades God to keep God's promise to go with them and then asks for a special revelation for himself.

Psalm 99

Today's Psalter reading is a hymn of praise. It echoes our reading from Exodus by referring to God's presence in the pillar of cloud and the statutes God gave the Israelites at Mount Sinai.

1 Thessalonians 1:1–10

As the Season of Pentecost starts to prepare for Advent, some of the lectionary readings begin to involve the theme of God's future. It is appropriate then that our Epistle lections for the end of Ordinary Time this year come primarily from 1 Thessalonians, in which Paul deals extensively with the coming of Christ in glory. First Thessalonians is probably the earliest of Paul's letters and therefore the oldest of the writings in the New Testament. Today's lesson is the letter's opening greeting and thanksgiving for the church.

Matthew 22:15–22

For a few weeks we have been reading Gospel stories in which Jesus and the religious authorities are in conflict in the temple. In today's lection, the leaders attempt to trap Jesus by posing a question concerning whether Jews should pay taxes to the empire that oppresses them. It is a trap because saying yes will offend Jews and saying no will contradict the law of the oppressors. But Jesus gives a "non-answer" in response, since those asking the question are not truly seeking an answer.

Proper 25A

[Sunday between October 23 and October 29 inclusive]

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Deuteronomy 34:1–12

Throughout our readings from Exodus over the last nine weeks, we have heard of the important role Moses played in leading the Israelites out of Egypt and through the wilderness. But it was not to be his task to lead the people into the promised land. Today's First Testament lection narrates Moses' death and the succession of Joshua to serve as the Israelites' leader.

Psalm 90:1–6, 13–17

Today's Psalter reading contrasts God's eternal being with human frailty. It also prays for God's grace and protection.

1 Thessalonians 2:1–8

In antiquity, letters were thought to make the writer present with those to whom the letter was sent. This is why Paul often grounds the pastoral message of his letters with reminders of his ministry and message with the congregation. Such is the rationale behind today's Epistle lesson from 1 Thessalonians.

Matthew 22:34–46

For the last month, our Gospel lections have been taken from Jesus' confrontation with the religious authorities in the temple during his last days in Jerusalem. Today's lesson is the final reading of such a conflict. This conversation deals with a question concerning Jesus' identity as the Christ in terms of the expectation that the Messiah must be a descendant of David.

Proper 26A

[Sunday between October 30 and November 5 inclusive, if All Saints' Day is not celebrated on this day.
See All Saints' Day or Sunday below.]

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections for Proper 26A

Joshua 3:7–17

Last week we read of the death of Moses. In today's lesson, Joshua assumes the reigns of leadership for the people. God affirms him before the people by performing the miracle of allowing the people to enter the promised land by crossing the Jordan River on dry land. This sign recalls the manner in which God had enabled the earlier generation of Israelites to cross the Red Sea under Moses' leadership.

Psalm 107:1–7, 33–37

Psalm 107 is a prayer of thanksgiving for the many ways God has provided for Israel in times of distress. The language in the excerpts we read today recalls God leading Israel on its journey through the wilderness to the promised land.

1 Thessalonians 2:9–13

Paul often grounds the message of his letters with reminders of his ministry and message with the congregation. Such is the rationale behind today's Epistle lesson. Paul describes his pastoral work with the church he founded in Thessalonica in language reminiscent of the work of philosopher preachers of the day.

Matthew 23:1–12

For a number of weeks, we have been reading from Jesus' confrontation with the religious authorities in the temple during his final days in Jerusalem. In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus turns from speaking *to* the religious authorities to speaking *about* the religious authorities. It is a biting indictment of the hypocrisy that all too often is found in religious leadership.

Introduction for All Saints' Day or Sunday, Year A

[November 1 or First Sunday in November]

The church celebrates November 1 or the first Sunday in November as All Saints' Day. In early Christianity, congregations honored martyrs on the anniversaries of their deaths. As more and more of the faithful died and different congregations merged their traditions, it became too complex to honor the memory of every individual martyr. Many days were still set aside for those the church canonized as saints, but All Saints' Day was created as a day to celebrate all those who died faithfully in the Lord. In recent years, Protestants have reclaimed the Pauline understanding of "saints" as all those who are part of the faith and thus celebrate All Saints' Day to remember especially those of the church who have died during the last year.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Revelation 7:9–17

Following a vision of the 144,000 of Israel worshiping God, John envisions a great multitude drawn from every nation praising God in the heavenly throne room. This crowd is composed of martyrs who went through a great tribulation and now find themselves in the eternal presence of God.

Psalm 34:1–10, 22

Our Psalter reading is a prayer of thanksgiving for deliverance from great affliction. It speaks of God redeeming the life of the distressed.

1 John 3:1–3

As the book of Revelation offered a vision of martyrs redeemed by God, so the author of 1 John provides his readers with a claim that when Christ is revealed in the future those who are suffering various types of social persecution for their faith will be made like Christ.

Matthew 5:1–12

Today's Gospel lection is taken from the opening words of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount—the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes have traditionally been associated with All Saints' Day because they have been interpreted as describing the characteristics of faithful saints. In reality, however, they should be heard not as instructions but as true blessings for those striving to be faithful in the face of struggles.

Proper 27A

[Sunday between November 6 and November 12 inclusive if All Saints' Day is not celebrated on this Sunday. See All Saints' Day or Sunday above.]

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

[NOTE: the following introductions need to be altered if the readings for Proper 26 were not read because of the celebration of All Saints' Day.]

Joshua 24:1–3a, 14–25

Last week we read of Joshua leading the Israelites across the Jordan River into the promised land. With God's help, Joshua led the Israelites in conquering the Canaanites and taking control of the land. Israel was now a nation. Today's First Testament lection is a covenant ceremony between God and the nation. Joshua leads the ceremony just before he dies.

Psalm 78:1–7

Similar to other psalms we have read this season, Psalm 78 recounts Israel's salvation history from its beginnings to the time of David. The opening of the lengthy poem, which we read today, echoes Joshua's covenant ceremony in that it speaks of passing on God's torah from one generation to the next.

1 Thessalonians 4:13–18

One of the reasons Paul wrote the first letter to the church at Thessalonica was to correct their misinterpretation of the future coming of Christ in glory. In the early days of Christianity, believers expected Jesus to return soon to save the faithful. But they were unsure what this meant for those Christians who died before Jesus returned. Paul offers a pastoral response to this question in today's Epistle lection.

Matthew 25:1–13

For a number of weeks we have been reading from Jesus' public teaching during his last days in Jerusalem. Matthew organizes Jesus' teaching into five primary discourses. Throughout the year we have read from the first four: the ethical discourse (or Sermon on the Mount), the parables discourse, the missionary discourse, and the community discourse. Today we read from the final discourse—private teaching about God's future offered to the disciples during Jesus last days.

Proper 28A

[Sunday between November 13 and November 19 inclusive]

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections for Proper 28A

[NOTE: the following introductions need to be altered if the readings for Proper 27 were not read because of the celebration of All Saints' Day.]

Judges 4:1–7

For the last few weeks, our First Testament lections have been concerned with Joshua. After his death a number of charismatic leaders arose to “judge” (or lead) the confederation of the twelve tribes of Israel. Given the patriarchal context of the day, it is surprising that one of those judges was a woman. Today’s reading is the opening of the story of Deborah in the book of Judges.

Psalm 123

Our First Testament lesson told of the Israelites calling out to God for help in the face of oppression by the Canaanites. Similarly, Psalm 123 is a prayer of supplication for divine help in the face of community distress.

1 Thessalonians 5:1–11

In last week’s Epistle reading, Paul explained to the Thessalonians that the faithful who died before Christ returned in glory would be included in God’s apocalyptic salvation. In today’s lesson, Paul extends the interpretation of Christ’s return in order to call his readers to be faithful as they wait for the day of the Lord.

Matthew 25:14–30

Last week we began reading from Matthew’s fifth and final discourse—Jesus’ private teaching offered to the disciples about God’s future. The passage we read was the parable of the ten bridesmaids. Today we read the parable of the talents from that same discourse.

Introduction for Reign of Christ (Proper 29A)

[Sunday between November 20 and November 26 inclusive]

One of the newer holy days of the church year, the Reign of Christ, also known as Christ the King, was instituted in 1925 to celebrate Christ's present and future rule over humankind. The celebration is an appropriate way to end the liturgical year. As Advent opened the year with the church waiting in expectation for God-in-Christ to come to us, so the Reign of Christ looks forward to the consummation of God's reign of peace and justice in the final exaltation of Christ.

Oral Introductions for Individual Lections

Ezekiel 34:11–16, 20–24

Our First Testament reading speaks of God as a shepherd who will gather the scattered and exiled flock of Israel back into their own land and who will judge between the fat and the lean sheep. This passage from Ezekiel foreshadows the metaphorical use of sheep in today's Gospel lesson.

Psalm 100

Psalm 100 is a song of praise and thanksgiving. Echoing our reading from Ezekiel, the psalmist celebrates God as shepherd of the people.

Ephesians 1:15–23

Today's Epistle lesson comes from the letter to the Ephesians. The reading is the author's prayer of thanksgiving for the recipients. But part of the opening prayer is a celebration of the exaltation of Christ.

Matthew 25:31–46

For the last two weeks we have read from Matthew's fifth discourse—Jesus' private teaching offered to the disciples about God's future. We read the parables of the ten bridesmaids and of the talents. Today's passage from that discourse is the parable of the king judging the nations, separating the sheep and the goats.