

“In a cultural environment where religion is often used to enhance one’s identity, John Martens’s *The Word on the Street* is a good example of what Pope Francis called ‘theology on one’s knees.’ Doing theology begins with Scripture and worship: in this sense, a book of Sunday reflections for the liturgical year stands at the center, at the beginning, and the end of what nurtures the Christian experience, beyond the different liturgical and political commitments that divide the Church today. But John Martens’s book is far from indifferent to the meaning of Scripture for the life of Christians in the world of today.”

— Massimo Faggioli, professor of theology and religious studies at Villanova University (Philadelphia)

“Every week at *America* magazine, I wait with eager anticipation to see what John Martens is going to say about the Gospel for the coming Sunday or Feast Day. And I am never, ever, disappointed. Firmly grounded in the latest Scripture scholarship, wonderfully practical, and beautifully written, his reflections always teach me something new. Martens is that rare scholar that can write well for the general audience, and, even rarer, say something new.”

— James Martin, SJ, author of *Jesus: A Pilgrimage*

“John Martens is not only an excellent biblical scholar, he also has a pastor’s soul. These weekly reflections help us get inside the scriptures each Sunday in a way that is scholarly, accessible, and spiritually rich. He makes the Word of God alive in so many thoughtful ways. This volume is a perfect synthesis of heart and mind, a place I can go to learn about the biblical readings for each week, be touched by God and grow spiritually. I enthusiastically recommend *The Word on the Street* for all Christians, from thoughtful high school and college students to lay adults of all ages, and even (and especially) to theologians. Each reflection has something for everyone.”

— Peter Feldmeier, Murray/Bacik Endowed Professor of Catholic Studies, University of Toledo



# THE WORD ON THE STREET

Year B

*Sunday Lectionary Reflections*

JOHN W. MARTENS



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# Preface

For those who read the Bible as the word of God, it is a properly daunting task to write on the Scripture. God's word has been given to us for our salvation, to allow us to order our lives properly and to grow in holiness, which is to grow to be more and more like God. As the apostle Paul urged the Thessalonians, "we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more" (1 Thess 4:1). That is, to grow in holiness is a continuing process and so, too, is reading and understanding the Bible. It is a task that is never finished, in which new insights and developments continue to emerge. To be able to speak authoritatively on the Scripture, therefore, ought not to be an act of hubris, but an act of humility, reflection, and prayer in which God is allowed to speak to us and direct us.

The writings you find here are mostly the products of a weekly process in which I spent time thinking about and praying with the readings for each Sunday, and pondering the things of my life, both ordinary and extraordinary, as I constructed my columns for *America* magazine's *The Word* and then returned to them and revised each of them as I prepared this book. A number of reflections, ten in total, have also been prepared specifically for this edition and have not appeared in *America* previously. The same processes, however, lie behind these writings.

It is a humbling task not just because I am writing on Scripture, but because I am aware of how many people have read the columns and will read this book, hoping to gain spiritual guidance, sustenance, and inspiration, and how many great scholars have written the column for *America* magazine in the previous years and decades. But then one adds to this the fact that some of the greatest minds ever have been writing on Scripture throughout the ages, such as St. Jerome, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas . . . and it is enough to make you throw down your quill (or keyboard) and wonder what you have to add.

And at this point, Scripture comes to our aid once again. You realize that the Bible is written for every age and it needs to be heard anew by every person and that task will fall on some of us in every era. Paul claimed that he was "the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle,

because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain" (1 Cor 15:9-10). I am not comparing myself to Paul, but I am suggesting that each of us has a call that, even when we feel unworthy of it, God gives us the ability to fulfill. Paul went on to say that "I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me" (1 Cor 15:10). I cannot say that I worked harder than anyone, but I can say that these columns emerge from my long training in biblical studies, my desire to grasp God's word, and my willingness to sit with the Bible, in English, Greek, and Hebrew, and to deliberate over each word, in order to answer a call I was not certain I was capable of fulfilling. More and more, I realize it is God's grace that enables the hard work and the skills that I claim as my own.

It is here, too, where I must thank my colleagues at *America* magazine, especially James Martin, SJ, Matt Malone, SJ, Bob Collins, SJ, Tim Reidy, Kerry Weber, and many others, who persevered in order to give me the opportunity to write the column, and who encouraged me along the way and did the hard work of editing my columns every week. They allowed me the freedom to write on Scripture in whatever context emerged for that week and gave me unfailing support on whatever path I chose. In the same way, I wish to thank my editors at Liturgical Press for giving me this opportunity and shepherding it from start to finish with such professional care.

I also must thank my parents, John and Gertrude Martens, for instilling in me a great love of Scripture, which was cemented in the Mennonite church in which I grew up and by a large extended family on both my mother's and father's sides of the family. I grew up in an environment thoroughly drenched in Scripture, which was not seen as a dead letter but as a living word that had been enacted, for instance, in bringing my family from the horrors of Stalinist Soviet Union to the refugee camps of post-World War II Europe and then to Canada. They did not and do not see these events as accidental, but as signs of God's providence. This is how they continue to read and interpret the Bible: it impacts our day-to-day lives and makes sense of them, giving them meaning and purpose.

Real interpretation of Scripture takes place at the ground level, in how we live our lives, and no one has helped me shape my interpretation of Scripture more than my own family, Tabitha, Sam, and Jake, who have aided me not just to think and to write about the Bible, but have challenged me to live out the Scripture every day, at street level.

Finally, however, I wish to thank all of you, the readers, who have sent numerous emails and handwritten letters (yes, readers send handwritten

letters in envelopes still!) to encourage and support me every week. It is for the readers that this book is titled *The Word on the Street*. It is not intended to indicate a kind of hip knowingness about the ways of the world, but to indicate that Scripture is intended to speak to us where we live, whether the street, the suburbs, refugee camps, the big city, or the farm, and to meet us in our daily lives. Wherever you are and whatever stage of life you are in, God has something to say to you through the word of God. I am thankful that I can participate in this work and thank God for allowing this opportunity to speak with you. I hope you enjoy reading this book as much as I have enjoyed writing it and I hope this book enables you to encounter God, the source of all true joy, in Scripture and on the street, as you go about your lives ordinary and extraordinary, certain in the knowledge that God is with you.

John W. Martens



# DAILY DISTRACTIONS

## First Sunday of Advent

*Readings:* Isa 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7; Ps 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19;  
1 Cor 1:3-9; Mark 13:33-37

*“Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.”*  
(Mark 13:33)

Pope Francis said, on World Environment Day, June 5, 2013, “We are losing our attitude of wonder, of contemplation, of listening to creation . . . Why do we think and live horizontally, we have drifted away from God, we no longer read his signs” (General Audience, St. Peter’s Square). He was referring to the physical environment, but he links the lack of awareness of our physical surroundings, nature, and the human milieu to inattentiveness and distraction concerning the spiritual world. If we do not attend carefully to the things of this world, including ourselves, we lose sight of God.

During Advent we need to refocus our spiritual attention. One way we can do this is to gently question our need for instant gratification and quick answers in all areas of life. How many of us today are bound by our smartphones, responding thoughtlessly by reaching for our phones whenever we hear email or direct message tings, regardless of what we are doing or with whom we are talking? Our devices follow us everywhere, not allowing us time to think or reflect.

We are losing the sense of wonder and contemplation, unable to read the signs of the times because of distractedness. This has an impact on our prayer, sense of community and family, and spiritual reflection. Distraction has permeated our daily lives so completely that intellectual, spiritual, and emotional focus can no longer be taken for granted. Distractedness does not allow us to wait; it does not allow for patience, for it wants what it wants now.

Constant access to information and sources of knowledge is not a substitute for wisdom. It can, however, draw us into the mire of minutiae,

away from real thinking, wonder, and contemplation, and lead us to ignore our need to wait patiently to be prepared to encounter Christ. Patient waiting is neither distracted nor empty behavior. Patient waiting allows us to contemplate our lives and consider how we will prepare to greet the coming of Christ during Advent, to wonder about the signs of God and what they are speaking to us, to listen attentively to Scripture and what it is saying in the church and in the world.

We need to adopt an internal quiet to wait with and for Jesus. Before his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus taught his disciples how to wait patiently for his return by means of a parable. He taught them to “beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.” This is not an instruction to anxiety, but guidance on attentiveness. The instructions for waiting on Christ are outlined in the parable. The slaves were asked to take charge of the household, “each with his work,” and the doorkeeper was commanded “to be on the watch.” The household is asked to continue its work and its daily routines with their minds attuned to when the master would return. Jesus calls for vigilance.

In the final part of the image, Jesus instructs his disciples: “Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

“Keep awake” is not about sleep, but about spiritual torpor, which in our day manifests itself often as busyness in the form of distractedness. Distractedness is a way of not paying attention to oneself or the needs of others or the voice of God because we are so busily doing nothing. Being awake when the Messiah arrives depends upon our ability to wait quietly and to be aware enough to recognize Christ when he comes. To wait for Christ patiently demands active attention. The prophet Isaiah says, “There is no one who calls on your name, / or attempts to take hold of you.” But how can one call on someone he or she no longer knows? The difficulty today is not necessarily that people reject Christ, but that they do not know him and so they cannot be awake and attentive to the signs reminding us that the Messiah is coming.



Think about your own busyness and distractedness. How can you focus more fully on the things that matter to you? How can you reduce distractedness as you await the coming of Christ? What needs your full attention today?

# THE COMFORT OF HOPE

## Second Sunday of Advent

*Readings:* Isa 40:1-5, 9-11; Ps 85:9-10, 11-12, 13-14;  
2 Pet 3:8-14; Mark 1:1-8

*“Comfort, O comfort my people, / says your God.”* (Isa 40:1)

What comfort is there in waiting? Comfort is usually not found standing in line at the DMV or waiting for an appointment at the doctor’s office as the minutes tick away. Then you simply hope, as frustration builds, that you can get out as quickly as possible and get on with your life.

This sort of ordinary, everyday hope has to do with desires and wishes that come and go and quickly pass. These everyday hopes can be more significant than this daily drudgery, too, regarding long-term hopes for sports teams, for work, and for family. These are things in which we invest our lives and dream dreams about accomplishments and fulfillment, but these hopes often have to do with “hoping for” something.

But there is another kind of waiting that brings deeper comfort because it is based upon more fundamental hope, a “hoping in” something. Fundamental hope does not have to do with “having” or “acquiring,” but is focused on the welfare of people and our hope of salvation. Josef Pieper spoke of fundamental hope as arising when everyday hopes withered and blew away. “Out of the loss of ordinary, everyday hope arises authentic hope,” wrote Pieper in *Hope and History* (quoting Herbert Plügge [San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994]). This is the hope of the martyrs, which persists when all human hopes have been vanquished.

This fundamental hope, grounded in the being of the living God of Israel, led Isaiah to call out, “Comfort, O comfort my people, / says your God.” What is the comfort that Isaiah is to offer to God’s people? It is the promise of God himself, who will act in the future for his people: “See, the Lord GOD comes with might, / and his arm rules for him; / his reward is with him, / and his recompense before him. / He will feed his flock like a shepherd; / he will gather the lambs in his arms, / and carry them

in his bosom, / and gently lead the mother sheep." This promise grounds the fundamental hope of a people who must wait for it in faithfulness. This is hope in the comfort of God.

Isaiah promises that hope will not disappoint, and we are assured in the psalm, "Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, / that his glory may dwell in our land." The Gospel of Mark recalls the words of the prophet Isaiah, seeing the fulfillment of this hope in "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. / As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, / 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, / who will prepare your way; / the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: / 'Prepare the way of the Lord, / make his paths straight.''"

The hope of the early Christians was that Jesus would indeed enact the hopes of Isaiah, establishing the kingdom of never-ending peace and righteousness, the end of waiting in exile banished. When the kingdom was not established in the way the early Christians had hoped, but through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the disciples did not abandon Jesus or his promises but relied upon a more fundamental hope: the truthfulness and faithfulness of God to do what God had promised in a time that is not our own and does not adhere to human schedules or calculations.

In 2 Peter we read "that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. . . . But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home." This fundamental hope gives us comfort because it is beyond the hopes that disappoint; it is not a "thing" we want or "stuff" we think we need, but the more fundamental reality that gives us deep comfort: Jesus will return and in the returning of Jesus our deepest needs are met. Our waiting is not the absence of hope, or hope dissipating in a dreary waiting room, or dreams that do not come to fruition. It is the comfort of the living God, who comes to us when ordinary hopes disappear and who is coming to us even now. And the joy of this hope gives comfort even in the waiting.



Meditate on the process of waiting in Advent. Do you ever find yourself without hope? How does God's hope come to you? How do you find comfort in hope at Advent?

# FULL OF GRACE

## **The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary**

*Readings:* Gen 3:9-15, 20; Ps 98:1, 2-3, 3-4;  
Eph 1:3-6, 11-12; Luke 1:26-38

*“And he came to her and said, ‘Greetings, favored one!  
The Lord is with you.’” (Luke 1:28)*

The feast of the Immaculate Conception developed in the history and life of the church, not simply from Scripture, but from the reflections of the faithful in the church on Mary and her role in salvation history. It was the lived faith of the church that led to the understanding of the immaculate conception of Mary and, secondarily, the writings of theologians reflecting on Scripture and the tradition of the church. These reflections took place over many centuries before being promulgated as a doctrine of the church. The doctrine arose from this lived faith, already accepted within the church by numerous faithful, and contemplation of the requisite holiness necessary for the task to which Mary had been chosen, her sinlessness, and the challenge her sinlessness posed to the doctrine on original sin. In 1854, Pope Pius IX proclaimed, “The most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin” (*Ineffabilis Deus*: DS 2803).

The doctrine of the immaculate conception points to the unique role of Mary in salvation history, and among humanity, but also to the limitations of Scripture without the interpretive and developmental role of tradition and, ultimately, the need for the magisterium of the church as the final interpreter on matters of doctrine.

For the primary teachings of the immaculate conception of Mary are not obviously supported by the biblical passages apart from the interpretive

function of the church and the tradition of the church, that which has been revealed to the church through its history, theology, and reflection on the ancient and apostolic tradition. First of all, no passage in the Old or New Testament makes direct reference to Mary's conception. In fact, Mary's conception appears only in a noncanonical text, the Infancy Gospel of James, which is also known as the Protoevangelium of James. In this text, Mary's parents Anna and Joachim are without a child and are given one only after they have offered prayers for a child in light of Anna's barrenness. While the text does not claim Mary is without sin, she is presented as especially pure and as a girl was dedicated as an undefiled virgin to the Jerusalem temple. She remained a virgin, according to the Infancy Gospel of James, even during the birth of Jesus, and perpetually after the birth of Jesus.

While in the past Genesis 3:15 was thought to reference Mary's sinlessness directly, this is no longer thought to be the case. The verse, in the NAB, which is very similar to the NRSV, tells of the enmity between the serpent, the woman, and the woman's offspring: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, / and between your offspring and hers; / He will strike at your head, / while you strike at his heel." The locus for the use of this text in establishing Mary's sinlessness was found in the Vulgate's (mis)translation of "he" for "she": *she* will strike at your head. So, the Douay-Rheims has "I will put enmities between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed: she shall crush thy head, and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel." Translators today are of one accord that the reference is to "her offspring," and so the personal pronoun should be translated as "he." Yet, even if the traditional understanding of this passage was maintained, there is no direct claim of Mary's sinlessness.

The key line perhaps in all of Scripture regarding Mary's unique status is in Luke 1:28, in which the Douay-Rheims translates Gabriel's greeting to Mary as "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee." Questions about the traditional rendering of this verse abound, as seen in the NRSV translation, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." While I think the NRSV translation is weak—does Luke wish to say only that Mary had gained favor?—it raises issues as to how much theological weight should be placed on a simple Greek perfect participle.

The traditional rendering of this perfect participle has understood that Mary had already been graced, that is, the angel Gabriel is acknowledging something about Mary's unique nature. The word "grace" should appear in the translation, but it is still fair to ask, what does "full of grace" mean? It does not clearly indicate on its own, and cannot be pressed to indicate on its own linguistically, that Mary was born free of the stain of original sin.

But it is precisely here where the church—reflecting on the theological reality of Mary expressed by the relevant biblical passages, a significant noncanonical text of the early church, the teachings of the ecumenical council at Ephesus (431) that Mary was the *theotokos*, and the theological developments throughout ecclesiastical history—claims the authority to pronounce on the reality of Mary’s sinlessness. The teaching of Mary’s immaculate conception developed in the living tradition of the church as it reflected on the holiness necessary for the task to which she had been called and the Scriptures that occasioned this reflection. We should continue to reflect on Mary’s holiness, too, for it was through her being prepared to receive the Son of God that the Second Person of the Trinity became incarnate. In order for her to do so it was necessary that she be “full of grace,” free from all stain of sin, open to be the handmaiden of the Word so that all the world could encounter the Word in the flesh.



Ponder the unique role and person of Mary. How is she a model of a disciple for you? How does Mary intercede for you with her son, Jesus? As you reflect on these Scriptures, does the role of tradition and the magisterium become more significant for you?