

“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 not only is an excellent biblical scholar but 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 C

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 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. 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, which 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 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 continue to encourage me along the way and do the hard work of editing my columns every week. They have allowed me the freedom to write on Scripture in whatever context emerges for that week and have given me unfailing support of whatever path I have chosen. 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. 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 e-mails 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 that these columns enable 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

WAITING IN LOVE

First Sunday of Advent

Readings: Jer 33:14-16; Ps 25:4-14;
1 Thess 3:12-4:2; Luke 21:25-36

“May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all.” (1 Thess 3:12)

Advent is a time of waiting and preparing. Tom Petty sang that the waiting is the hardest part, but it is even more difficult to determine how to prepare and how to use one’s time to best advantage. While Advent is a time of preparing to welcome Jesus at Christmas, a celebration of the incarnation, it is also a time of looking forward to the return of Jesus at the eschaton. The eschaton, or “end of time,” appears in popular culture—in novels, video games, and movies that draw on apocalyptic themes—as a time of warfare, battle, and grim hopelessness. How do these dark themes aid our waiting and preparation for the coming of the Lord?

First, it is important to acknowledge that Jesus does warn in dramatic language about the coming of the end. “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” But however such mythic language is to be interpreted, and I would opt for a figurative reading of these images, the end is not primarily about destruction, unless we are talking about the destruction of evil.

The flip side of the destruction of evil, of course, is the establishment of God’s rule, because “then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory” and when these events occur, “stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” The end is not about hopelessness; it is about hope, seen in the mythic language of the apocalypse as the conquering of evil, both inwardly and outwardly.

Preparing for a battle at the end of time is not how we are to prepare for the end—note that these images of warfare have to do with God’s eradication of evil, not human warfare. Guns and tanks are not the means by which we are to await and prepare for our redemption. The prophet Jeremiah speaks of the kingdom of God as a place where the Messiah “shall execute justice and righteousness in the land” and the land itself, saved and in safety, says Jeremiah, will have a new name: “The Lord is our righteousness.”

We are to prepare for the kingdom of righteousness, Jesus instructs, by placing ourselves “on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life” and to “be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.” Yet, this is still only one type of preparation, waiting with the right attitude and the right mindfulness.

Paul teaches that day-to-day life is taking this right attitude and mindfulness and applying it not to the far future, events that may not loom in our own lifetimes, but to the way in which we conduct ourselves in every action, small or large. Paul says, “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.” It is not an accident that not long after these instructions for righteous living, which Paul acknowledges the Thessalonians have been carrying out, that he speaks of the coming end. The way to prepare for the end is to live our lives in a way pleasing to God.

Yet, we are not alone in our task and so not alone in waiting and preparation. In fact, Paul stresses that the basic tasks of the Christian life, to grow in love and holiness, are supported through God’s grace active in our lives. Paul says, “*May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all*” and “*may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.*” The one we are awaiting and preparing to greet is the same one who even now is with us and aiding us in our preparations.



As you await the coming of Christ, how are you preparing for his return?

ANTICIPATION

Second Sunday of Advent

Readings: Bar 5:1-9; Ps 126:1-6;
Phil 1:4-11; Luke 3:1-6

"The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced." (Ps 126:3)

To anticipate is to expect. And to expect great things from God is not to be disappointed. The promises of Scripture are breathtaking, shocking, defying common expectations, seeming not to be met, yet satisfying, even in the waiting. For what others cannot see externally, we know in our hearts, our minds, our souls has come, is coming, will come to pass. The psalmist expects restoration even in the midst of suffering: "May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy." It is on the basis of God's past faithfulness that the psalmist looks forward to God's final renewal.

Indeed the Old Testament as a whole anticipates healing and restoration. Baruch instructs the people of Israel with a beautiful image drawn from everyday life: "Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God. Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God; put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting." Mourning garments, sackcloth torn and ripped in displays of sorrow, will be replaced by heavenly garments, everlasting displays of God's righteousness and reign.

Yet, Baruch's vision of the future is not just for those who read the words after return from exile, but for those still to return, the exiles of the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities, "your children gathered from west and east at the word of the Holy One." These words of Baruch, echoing the prophet Isaiah, foresee the coming of the kingdom built in the presence of all the tribes returned, but even more, a world made new—"for God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low and the valleys filled up, to make level ground, so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God."

It is the same prophet Isaiah that echoes once more in the mouth of John the Baptist, as the Gospel of Luke presents him crying out to those in Judea, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." Note the difference, however, in John's vision and that of Baruch: the future is built on the return of the exiles, as Baruch envisions, symbolized in Jesus' ministry by the twelve apostles, but in Luke it is a call of salvation that extends to all the nations of the world. As John the Baptist says, "all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

It is this very process, of awaiting and preparing for the coming of God's kingdom, inaugurated by the first coming of the Messiah, that emboldens and fires the work of the church, such as seen in the ministry of Paul and Timothy. The saints, the holy ones in Christ Jesus at Philippi and beyond, including the bishops and deacons, says Paul, are also engaged in work of cosmic significance. This work is to prepare one another and to bring others into the kingdom as we await the Parousia or coming of Christ.

This is not work, however, in which we struggle on our own, for we are supported by our brothers and sisters in Christ, laypeople and clergy, and most significantly supported by God. Paul tells the church he is "constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now." He acknowledges his support and the work of the church. But Paul is also "confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ." It is not our own work, though we are key participants, helping and supporting one another, but the work of God. Paul's prayer for us is nothing but that our life be modeled on the divine life, for he prays "that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless." This is our work: to cooperate with God's work in us as we await the coming of the kingdom in fullness.



As you await the coming of Christ, how are you working to build the kingdom?

JOY and GENTLENESS

Third Sunday of Advent

Readings: Zeph 3:14-18; Isa 12:2-6;
Phil 4:4-7; Luke 3:10-18

*“Let your gentleness be known to everyone.
The Lord is near.” (Phil 4:5)*

Some people decry the loss of manliness today, the feminization of men, but manliness in this caricature is often a crude stereotype: men like cars, sports, and beer; they are tough guys who do not cry, have no time for social niceties, chick flicks, or emotion. They work with their hands, build things, and treat the confines of an office cubicle with horror. There are men like this, but it is problematic when masculinity is categorized as any one sort of character, such as stoic tough guy.

Why do we not, for instance, take images of masculinity from biblical figures, like Jesus or Paul? How do they live out their masculinity? Advent, a time of preparation, is also a time for reconsideration and reflection, a time to consider change, renewal, and restoration. Waiting can lead to conversion. Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi offers opportunities for reflection on and conversion of a certain type of masculinity that desires always to be in power and control, though Paul’s advice transcends gender and its stereotypes. Philippians is a letter focused on rejoicing no matter how difficult our conditions and circumstances; it is a letter about letting go and trusting in God’s plan.

Paul is in prison as he writes to the Philippians, and he encourages them to “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.” There are two admonitions that stand out here: the call to rejoice; and the call to gentleness. Paul is engaged in his own waiting while imprisoned, but he calls on his fellow Christians to rejoice whatever the circumstance and to “let your gentleness be known to everyone.” The word Paul uses here for gentleness, *epieikes*, also has the sense of graciousness, forbearance, and civility, which is to be made known

to “all people” (*pasin anthrôpois*). Waiting in difficult circumstances is hard enough, for anyone who has spent time in doctors’ offices, car repair shops, or in line at government offices: nerves get jangled, tempers fray and break. Paul’s advice comes as he awaits his possible execution.

No matter the circumstance, Paul instructs us that patient joy is required as a Christian. In some ways the Christian life as a whole is a life of waiting, not just for the advent of the Messiah but for holiness to grow and our vices to wither. We are called upon to wait and endure not just situations but people with gentleness, tinged with graciousness, forbearance, and civility. For those of us who wait on pins and needles, unease our constant companion, or on the verge of breaking down, with anger poking through our veneers of civility, this is advice that must be lived in little ways on a daily basis.

The ability to rejoice in God emerges from our willingness to treat small or large situations, and most significantly people, with gentleness. Indeed this is what allows us to experience joy in our lives. Moments in our lives transformed by the grace of God from near occasions to anger, venting, and cruelty to times of gentleness, restraint, and kindness.

This is, of course, advice from Paul on how to live out our Christian life for all people, men and women, but the focus on gentleness in Paul’s guidance is often seen as a female trait. Paul’s counsel, though, is in plural, “you as a whole,” not for individuals, but for the whole church. However we live out our Christian lives, and the various gifts we have, our life must show constant evidence of joy and gentleness, especially as men who are used to imposing our wills on others, being in charge, and making our ways known. This is the challenge of waiting, of allowing it to transform us in holiness and create in us joy.

It is what we want most deeply. When the crowds went to see John the Baptist, thinking he might be the Messiah, but certainly awaiting the Messiah, for “the people were filled with expectation,” they asked one question, over and over: “What then should we do?” John gave a variety of specific answers for people in general and for soldiers and tax collectors in particular. The answers in specific can indeed be multiplied, yet it must be said that in all of our preparations to welcome the Messiah joy and gentleness ought to be high on the list and these traits allowed to challenge common notions of masculinity.



As you await the coming of Christ, how are you expressing your joy and gentleness?