

Ponder

CONTEMPLATIVE BIBLE STUDY
FOR YEAR B

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Introduction

Our Roots: St. John's Bible Study or "Neighborhood"

To explain the goals and format of this Bible study, let me first describe its roots, the community from which it emerged. It began at St. John's Catholic Church, a mid-nineteenth-century parish that is known historically as the "mother church" of Worcester in central Massachusetts. It is a flourishing, gritty, downtown parish that draws a rich and diverse mix of people. Its mission is to serve the poor, and it hosts the largest daily soup kitchen in the city. St. John's also hosts thriving devotions, including its yearly Novena of Grace in Honor of Saint Francis Xavier, also called "The Lenten Retreat of the City of Worcester."

The rectory next door is a sprawling building that once housed priests in the diocese and now provides transitional sober housing for men. The setting for our weekly Bible study is the rectory dining room, a tired but dignified space. We gather at a well-worn table with old, wide, high-backed armchairs. The dining room sits just behind the Worcester train station, close enough that in summer evenings with the windows open, we have to shout to hear ourselves above the sound of trains pulling in and out. In the winter, the old furnace pumps out enough heat directly into the dining room to give us heat stroke, while the rest of the house remains drafty.

We gather after Mass on Tuesday evenings for one hour. Ours is a simple, drop-in, lectionary-based study that regularly gathers five to fifteen people. I provide a handout with the readings for the upcoming Sunday and some corresponding notes. Together, we pray with and then discuss one of the readings, sometimes two, then offer up communal prayers and go on our way.

The group that has been meeting for the past five years, in shifting forms and combinations, is a ragtag community, a mismatch of members. What unites us is our faith. Generally, we are Roman Catholic. Many of us would not rub shoulders outside the Bible

study, excepting perhaps sporadic handshakes in the pews. One member (Matthew) recently called our Bible study a “neighborhood” of bracing experiences and ideals, as distinguished from the “mutual admiration and unchallenged agreement” that so often marks the sameness of the people we choose to socialize with. “As it is with the neighborhood,” said Matthew, “so it is with the Bible study.”¹

And so it is. When gathering each week, one never knows who will show up or what the discussion dynamics will be. Lord knows, sometimes the results aren’t pretty! Yet we come back and try again. We are conservative, liberal, and moderate. We range in age from our twenties to our eighties. We are blue collar and white collar, jobless, retired, and working. Over the years, some of our participants have had homes to live in and others have not. Some of us come with mental or physical illnesses or histories of addiction. Our pastor attends regularly to prepare for Sunday’s homily. And I, the Bible scholar, “lead” the group, but the term is loose. When I am unable to make it (which once lasted a full year while I was teaching out of state), other members step in and guide the group with only the aid of the weekly handout.

Over the years, some members of the St. John’s Bible Study have carefully collected these handouts in order to have a full, three-year set. Returning to earlier handouts years later, I find myself surprised by how much I gain from these notes and reflections, as if they were written by someone else. They have become a rich, ongoing treasure in my own personal prayer life. Now that these handouts have been gathered together into this series of books, I hope they may become a valuable resource in your prayer life too.

The Format

To truly understand this study and the flexibility it offers to individuals or groups, I invite you to use your liturgical imagination. The format on the following pages is simple. Some would perhaps even

1. Matthew was reflecting on and quoting from Christopher Lasch’s *Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), in particular Lasch’s discussion of “communities” of like-minded people versus “neighborhoods” in which people meet as equals, without regard to race, class, or national origins (Lasch, 117, 119–21).

consider it simplistic, though this perception would be misguided. Most importantly, the simplicity of the format allows for freedom and independence of prayer and study. First, I provide the entirety of Sunday's readings so that participants have easy access to the texts without having to consult additional Bibles or missalettes. Only the psalm is missing, not because it is less important, but for issues of space. Having the readings easily accessible has proven invaluable in our own slightly chaotic parish, where the notion of ordering extra Bibles and somehow keeping them together in one space is daunting.

Under each reading are my commentary notes. These notes provide some basic background and information about the readings. The goal is not to lead readers into viewing the texts a certain way (in other words, my way), but to invite readers into their own deep knowledge of the texts, a kind of full-bodied understanding that I like to call "bone knowledge." Therefore, these notes are streamlined to create minimal mental clutter. They include historical and literary context, discussions of translation choices from the Hebrew or Greek (sometimes Aramaic), the broader contexts from the surrounding passages and books, and references to other Sunday readings. In these short summaries, I have distilled my own ideas, in consultation with commentaries and study Bibles, into what I consider to be the most pertinent information for a wide-ranging audience.

Finally, I include a section called "Ponder" that provides possible connections, essential ideas, or ongoing questions to consider from the texts. I have placed these last so as not to overly influence participants at the outset of the study; the goal is to refrain from reading them as long as necessary. This section, connected with the commentary notes below each reading, may be particularly helpful for those who lead the Bible study or are preparing to preach.

Together, the readings, notes, and "ponderings" provide a valuable yet simple tool for ongoing prayer and study. They also create a sort of Sunday missalette that some of our Bible study members take into the pews on Sunday for continued prayer and thoughtful preparation.

Union of Heart and Mind

As for the core principle of this Bible study, it is simple: union of heart and mind. The study takes the words of Vatican II's *Dei Verbum* seriously: Scripture, "the force and power of the word of God," is so

How to Use this Study—Groups

A basic “how-to guide” can be found on the inside front cover of this book, but the following description will provide more detailed guidance. Of course, you should feel free to adapt the following approach as needed to suit the needs, time constraints, and temperament of your group.

Silence. The group leader may invite everyone to settle into silence and come home to God if they’ve been “away” for a while. Remind the group that God is always present. Allow silence to take root for several long moments.

Opening Prayer. You will find an Opening Prayer on the inside front cover of this book.¹ You may wish to say this together, or your group may choose an alternative Opening Prayer.

***Lectio Divina* (20–30 min.).** Choose one of the Sunday readings (the first reading, the second reading, or the Gospel) and two people from your group to read. At this point, the group leader may wish to offer an invitation such as the following: “In this reading of our text, I invite us to open our hearts to this passage, to be curious, and to listen as if we’ve never heard this passage before. I invite us to listen, in particular, for a word or phrase that speaks to us today. At the end of the reading, we’ll go around the room and simply speak our words or phrases out loud, without any explanation. As always, when your turn comes, you can simply pass.”

Read the text slowly. One of the readers reads the selected text slowly and meditatively. The group listens for a word or phrase that especially speaks to them.

Share a word or phrase. After a moment of silence, group members speak their words or phrases out loud with no elaboration or discussion (or they may “pass”). Savor this litany of shared words.

1. The opening prayer is my translation of Psalm 19:15 (v. 14 in some English translations).

Read the text a second time. The second reader now reads the same text slowly and meditatively. The group continues to sink into the text and ponder the word or phrase they have heard, listening for how God might be speaking to or calling them.

Engage in Ignatian Contemplation if desired. At this point, if the text is conducive to an imaginative exercise, your group may engage in Ignatian Contemplation. Using the method for Ignatian Contemplation described above, the group leader may invite participants into the scene.

Share experience-based reflections. After a moment of silence, participants can share their thoughts and reflections on the text. Allow everyone to speak as prompted by the Spirit. At times, it may be helpful for the group leader to remind participants to stay in their hearts and leave any intellectual questions aside for the moment. He or she may also need to steer the sharing away from discussion and debate, keeping everyone focused on the text. Allow this sharing to continue until a natural stopping point.

Bible Study (20–30 min.). At this point, your group can move into the Bible “study” portion of your time together. Invite participants to move from “heart” to “mind.” Begin with discussing the reading you selected for *Lectio Divina*, but feel free to explore other readings if you exhaust your discussion of the originally selected text. Your group may wish to read the commentary notes together and discuss any lingering questions or insights. Along the way, you may need to remind the group to stay rooted in the text (see notes above on “The Mind”).

Ponder. Hold off on this section for as long as possible—or even avoid it altogether—so that participants can use this material for further pondering of the Sunday readings throughout the week.

Closing Prayer. At the end of the hour, draw the discussion to a natural close. Invite the group to join in prayer with an invitation such as: “For what shall we pray tonight?” After prayers are offered, you may offer a conclusion such as: “For these prayers that we speak out loud, and for those that we hold in the silence of our hearts, we pray together in the words that Jesus taught us.” Join together in praying the “Our Father.”

How to Use this Study—Individuals

For those using this study as individuals, you may find the group guide helpful, but the flow will be much freer and up to the movement of the Spirit. You will essentially follow the steps for individual practice of *Lectio Divina*. There are four parts to this practice: *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditation), *oratio* (prayer), and *contemplatio* (contemplation). For further resources and explanation, see the above descriptions for *Lectio Divina* and Ignatian Contemplation.

Begin by finding a quiet and comfortable space. Often, people find that committing to a specific place for daily prayer, whether a particular chair or room, or perhaps even a specific church pew, can be conducive to regular practice. You may want to set a timer for your prayer period. I used to pray in the pews for twenty minutes before Mass, so the beginning of the Mass became my natural “timer.”

I would suggest picking one text (or a part of a text) for your prayer period. Don’t attempt to go beyond that reading, unless you are strongly pulled to do so. Before beginning, open with a prayer or an intention for your prayer period. Then begin by reading the text slowly and meditatively. Do not try to get through the entire reading! Allow yourself to stop on any word, phrase, or image that strikes you. Rather than trying to move on quickly, stop and “sit” with this word or phrase. Marinate in it. Ingest it as a cow might chew its cud, chewing and swallowing, regurgitating and re-chewing to swallow again. This is the practice of *meditatio* or meditating on Scripture. If the imagery is particularly vivid, you might also find yourself drawn to Ignatian Contemplation, allowing your imagination to draw you into the scene and play with the word or image.

As you see fit, allow this practice of *meditatio* to open you to pray with God (*oratio*). You might reflect on why you were drawn to a particular word, phrase, or imagery. You might reflect on how God is speaking to you through the text. You may find yourself praying aloud or silently to God. You may experience God calling you to a particular form of action or “being” through the word. You may simply feel God’s presence.

The ultimate aim of this practice is to lead you to *contemplatio*, the practice of stillness or resting in God. Prayer is a winding ladder that we ascend and descend regularly, and this last stage is up to God's grace that helps draw you further and further into the quiet and stillness. This sense of interior stillness is what we call "recollection," when the mind and the senses become quiet and focused on listening to God. *Contemplatio* does not always happen. Yet praying with Scripture is ultimately about intimacy with God, and this stillness before God, this practice of *listening* rather than speaking to God, is the deepest form of intimacy.

During this period of prayer, you may end up praying through the entire passage. Or, you may never make it through the first verse. Just remember that there are no set "rules," and there is nothing to accomplish! You may spend the entire time meditating on a particular word. You may end up speaking to God about something on your heart and mind. You may never make it to *contemplatio*. You may even end up feeling like the whole time was a waste. Don't worry; this is all part of the practice! Even if the prayer period felt difficult or dry, like nothing was happening, trust that God was present. The fact that you made time for prayer reveals your desire and God's desire working through you. That is enough.

As you finish your period of prayer, take a few moments to re-orient yourself slowly. You might take a few moments simply to sit silently, and to express gratitude for the time. Whatever you do, be sure to close with a prayer. In group *Lectio Divina*, we pray the "Our Father" together. On your own, you may be drawn toward another prayer that feels more authentically yours.

As you shift from this heart-centered practice, you may be drawn to integrate the heart with the mind by reading the commentary notes under your passage. I would suggest waiting on these notes until you are finished with your period of prayer, though some may find that beginning with the commentary notes are helpful for sinking into prayer. You may also be drawn to peruse the other readings and consider how the readings are meant to fit together. Or perhaps you wish to remain in the heart and ponder further, in which case I would suggest reading the "Ponder" sections, which are created for deeper reflection on the readings.

Above all, remember that the format of this Bible study is open and flexible. How you use it is entirely up to you and the movement of the Spirit.

First Sunday of Advent

FIRST READING

ISAIAH 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7

You, LORD, are our father,
our redeemer you are named forever.
Why do you let us wander, O LORD, from your ways,
and harden our hearts so that we fear you not?
Return for the sake of your servants,
the tribes of your heritage.
Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
with the mountains quaking before you,
while you wrought awesome deeds we could not hope for,
such as they had not heard of from of old.
No ear has ever heard, no eye ever seen, any God but you
doing such deeds for those who wait for him.
Would that you might meet us doing right,
that we were mindful of you in our ways!
Behold, you are angry, and we are sinful;
all of us have become like unclean people,
all our good deeds are like polluted rags;
we have all withered like leaves,
and our guilt carries us away like the wind.
There is none who calls upon your name,
who rouses himself to cling to you;
for you have hidden your face from us
and have delivered us up to our guilt.
Yet, O LORD, you are our father;
we are the clay and you the potter:
we are all the work of your hands.

To open this liturgical year, we will be reading from the book of Isaiah for the first three Sundays of Advent. Chapters 56–66 likely date to the early Persian Period (late sixth–early fourth centuries BCE¹) during Judah's period of restoration after the Babylonian exile.

1. We will use the abbreviations “BCE/CE” (“Before the Common Era/Common Era”) rather than “BC/AD” (“Before Christ/*Anno Domini*”) in order to respect both Jewish and Christian perspectives, a respect that is so crucial to our full understanding and appreciation of Scripture.

Our reading takes specific verses from a broader communal lament (63:7–64:11) in which the community appeals to God to intervene and act powerfully on its behalf. In our verses, the expression “harden our hearts” (63:17) echoes the Exodus story, when God hardened Pharaoh’s heart (Exod 9:12). The verses beginning “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down . . .” contain old imagery of Yahweh as the storm God (63:19b–64:4), while the last verses in our reading (64:5-7) describe God’s just punishment for Israel’s lack of fidelity. God has turned away from the people, yet the goal is to redeem them. Israel has not remembered or been “mindful” of God. While experiencing God’s punishment, the people do not call upon God or “cling” to God (“cling” is a term of fidelity both toward God and other humans; see Gen 2:24 and Ruth 1:14). Israel beseeches God to turn back and revoke the punishment for those molded by God’s own hands.

 RESPONSORIAL PSALM

PSALM 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19

Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.

 SECOND READING

1 CORINTHIANS 1:3-9

Brothers and sisters:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I give thanks to my God always on your account
for the grace of God bestowed on you in Christ Jesus,
that in him you were enriched in every way,
with all discourse and all knowledge,
as the testimony to Christ was confirmed among you,
so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift
as you wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

He will keep you firm to the end,
irreproachable on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

God is faithful,
and by him you were called to fellowship with his Son, Jesus
Christ our Lord.

Paul's letter begins with a standard formula of greeting and thanksgiving. The introduction then reveals his disappointment with the Christian community he had established just a few years earlier, around 51 CE. The letter describes how the community has become unhealthy and fractured. In our reading, Paul uses thinly-veiled sarcasm and exaggerated language to reproach the community. He gives thanks for God's continued grace; but the people are only passive recipients of this grace, having failed to act according to Christ's standards. He specifically (and ironically) cites "discourse" and "knowledge" as spiritual gifts, attributes desired not by the early followers of Christ, but by the Romans. Paul states that God will keep the Corinthians firm and irreproachable, though the community appears to have been quite unstable. Still, this passage speaks to the theme that begins each liturgical year: vigilance in preparation for Christ's coming.

GOSPEL

MARK 13:33-37

Jesus said to his disciples:
"Be watchful! Be alert!
You do not know when the time will come.
It is like a man traveling abroad.
He leaves home and places his servants in charge, each with his
own work,
and orders the gatekeeper to be on the watch.
Watch, therefore;
you do not know when the lord of the house is coming,
whether in the evening, or at midnight,
or at cockcrow, or in the morning.
May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping.
What I say to you, I say to all: 'Watch!'"

Throughout this Advent season, we will read accounts of the origins of Jesus or his ministry from the first chapters of Mark, John, and Luke. This first Sunday of Advent, however, draws us not to the beginning of Mark, but rather to the middle. Each liturgical year begins and ends with a focus on the second coming of Christ and the importance of vigilance. This reading sets the stage for how we

should act throughout the Advent season, as encapsulated in the exhortation: “Be watchful! Be alert!” Chapter 13 begins with Jesus prophesying the destruction of the temple. The remainder of the chapter balances this theme with Jesus’s private teachings to Peter, James, John, and Andrew regarding signs that will precede the end times. These teachings close with our reading. The final line—“What I say to you, I say to all”—draws the chapter beyond the limits of the historical context to all of us.

Ponder

The prophetic voice in Isaiah exudes pain and longing for God’s deliverance, questioning why God continues to punish the people for their sins. This prolonged punishment has paradoxically allowed them to continue to “wander” from God. Simultaneously, however, the prophet trusts that God will redeem the people, stating that God’s very name is “our redeemer.” Our reading contains a tension between Israel’s sense of separation from God and ultimate trust in God’s presence. Have you experienced this tension in your own faith life? How is this a natural part of the human experience of God?

Isaiah expresses a reality affirmed by our second reading: our relationship with God begins with God; God first turns toward us, calls us, and strengthens us or keeps us “firm.” Yet both texts also recognize our responsibility in a mutual relationship with God, which Jesus calls us to in the Gospel through the idea of “seeing” or being “alert.” Our readings invite us to ponder this mutual relationship, particularly our responsibility to hear and respond this Advent season. How might we be mindful of God each moment, making space to “wake up” to God in our lives, in the needs of our community, and in the world around us?

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

FIRST READING

LEVITICUS 13:1-2, 44-46

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron,
“If someone has on his skin a scab or pustule or blotch
which appears to be the sore of leprosy,
he shall be brought to Aaron, the priest,
or to one of the priests among his descendants.
If the man is leprous and unclean,
the priest shall declare him unclean
by reason of the sore on his head.

“The one who bears the sore of leprosy
shall keep his garments rent and his head bare,
and shall muffle his beard;
he shall cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean!’
As long as the sore is on him he shall declare himself unclean,
since he is in fact unclean.
He shall dwell apart, making his abode outside the camp.”

The context for our reading is a section of Leviticus focused on the problems surrounding skin affliction or disease. The Hebrew term that we translate as “leprosy” (*tsara’at*) does not only refer to Hansen’s disease but to a wide variety of skin diseases that could be scaly, deep, showed raw skin, or were spreading over the body in a way that might be contagious. These types of skin disease unfortunately called for complete separation from the community. It is important to keep in mind that in this context, the term “unclean” is not a moral category. Placing our reading in its broader context, Leviticus describes the ritual process of examination, diagnosis, and separation of those with skin diseases (Lev 13:1-46), as well as their healing, cleansing, and return to the community (Lev 14:2-32). It was important that those with skin disease remained apart from the community in order to preserve the well-being of the community by containing the disease. However, the individual who was separated from the community viewed him/herself as dead (see Num 12:12); hence the rending of one’s garments, as in mourning. For many, the skin naturally healed

over time, and the individual went through the ritual process of examination, cleansing, and return to the community.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM

PSALM 32:1-2, 5, 11

I turn to you, Lord, in time of trouble, and you fill me with the joy of salvation.

SECOND READING

1 CORINTHIANS 10:31–11:1

Brothers and sisters,
whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do,
do everything for the glory of God.
Avoid giving offense, whether to the Jews or Greeks or the
church of God,
just as I try to please everyone in every way,
not seeking my own benefit but that of the many,
that they may be saved.
Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

In the verses leading up to this section of 1 Corinthians, Paul explains the limitations of religious exclusivity. His maxim is that followers of Christ must always consider the good of others above their own interests, acting in ways that unite rather than divide. The particular case is eating. If they dine in the home of a nonbeliever, they should eat (within reason) whatever is set before them without objection. Paul goes on to describe general rules of conduct for the Corinthian community. No matter what, they should always give glory to God. They should always seek what is good for the other and what will build up the other in Christ. And they should imitate Paul; in doing so, the Corinthians will imitate Christ.

GOSPEL

MARK 1:40-45

A leper came to Jesus and kneeling down begged him and said,
"If you wish, you can make me clean."

Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand,
touched him, and said to him,
"I do will it. Be made clean."

The leprosy left him immediately, and he was made clean.
Then, warning him sternly, he dismissed him at once.

He said to him, "See that you tell no one anything,
but go, show yourself to the priest
and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed;
that will be proof for them."

The man went away and began to publicize the whole matter.
He spread the report abroad
so that it was impossible for Jesus to enter a town openly.
He remained outside in deserted places,
and people kept coming to him from everywhere.

This week, we come to the end of Jesus's first two days of healing and teaching. A "leper" refers to anyone with a skin ailment or disease serious enough to force separation from the community (see the first reading). The leper makes a statement of fact and a powerful act of faith: Jesus can cleanse him. Jesus does cleanse the man and then, out of concern for the man's full reintegration and out of deference to the law, he instructs him to continue the procedure required by the Torah for cleansing and return to community. (Notice that Jesus does not refute the law or judge the law; he abides by it.) It is unclear whether the man obeys Jesus and shows himself to a priest. What we do know is that the man openly disobeys Jesus by spreading the story so that Jesus is unable to continue to teach and heal within the town. In this detail, Mark may be making a statement about the reaction of those who are cleansed by Christ: they cannot help but go out and "spread the word" or the good news. The man's act, however, made it more difficult for Jesus to move about freely. There may have also been an issue with Jesus's uncleanness; the one who

touches an unclean person becomes ritually unclean himself, hence the note about Jesus staying “in deserted places.”

Ponder

Our readings invite us to consider the importance of community. In ancient Israel, it was necessary to separate those with skin infections in order to protect the community. Yet this separation was also devastating for the one who was sick. In the Gospel, Jesus’s concern is the man’s full reintegration into the community after he is healed. And Paul reminds his audience to seek always what will build up and unify the community in faith. Together, these readings challenge us to reflect on our own communities. How do we seek to build up and support others, and how are we dependent upon and responsible for those around us?

The Gospel story contains powerful emotions—the man’s kneeling, begging, and likely elation at the end of the story; and Jesus’s deep compassion for the one who is suffering and marginalized. We might consider how Jesus would react to the ways in which we exclude others today, to our wide-ranging divisions, and to the systems that breed hierarchy and inequality. Paul exhorts us to be “imitators” of Christ in the second reading. What, then, is our responsibility in our communities today, in light of Paul’s exhortation and Jesus’s compassion?