



# God of the New

Discussing the Sunday Gospels for April

CATHRYN TORGERSON

APRIL 7, 2019

Fifth Sunday of Lent

John 8:1-11

**REFLECTION:** If we had to give God a title based on today’s readings, it could be “The God of Second Chances.” All the earlier readings set up this Gospel’s theme perfectly.

In the first reading (Isaiah 43:16-21), God speaks of what he is doing now in comparison to the past. The opening verses are a poetic retelling of how God drowned Pharaoh’s army in the Red Sea.

Then God indicates that he is currently working in a new way. Instead of using water to destroy, he uses it to bring life to the wilderness to sustain his people. It is a reminder that bad times do not last forever — God is always “doing something new!”

The responsorial psalm (126:1-6) similarly offers hope of changed circumstances. While there are tears in the present, the future will bring rejoicing.

Paul reflects on his life in the second reading from Philippians 3:8-14. Earlier Paul enjoyed the pinnacle of Jewish success: He had a great education, came from a good family, and lived out his faith by persecuting heretic Christians. But then he met Jesus and lost everything — friends, reputation, and prestige. Yet here he writes that those worldly benefits were “rubbish”

compared to knowing Jesus. The word *rubbish* is a sanitized translation of Paul’s original word which essentially means “dog doo.” To Paul, the best the world has to offer is nothing but a smelly pile of dung compared to Jesus!

Paul knows his journey is not yet over, but through hope in Jesus he can forget his past in order to embrace the future.

The Gospel offers this same hope of a better future to a sinner who could be stoned to death for her sin. She becomes a public pawn in a trap to discredit Jesus.

Jesus, however, does not take the bait. Instead, he shows God’s love and desire for second chances when he tells the woman that her sins are forgiven. This does not mean her sins do not matter, but it does mean she can have a new start. Jesus also tells her to

sin no more — an indication of the path her second chance at life should take.

Through all four Scripture passages — but especially in the Gospel — we are reminded that God offers us hope and leads us to what is new. His new life within us should be our desire.

**FOR ADULTS:** Where do you feel stuck and need hope? The first reading suggests that God may be working “something new” in your life. How can you better rely on God this week as you seek to make a new start?

**FOR STUDENTS:** The easiest Lenten application is to use the Gospel to discuss the importance of sin and how, thanks to the cross, we can be forgiven and receive a second chance.

Alternatively, especially if your community is facing challenges, this is a good time to talk about those challenges and the reality of hope. Are there small steps your students can take to help to bring hope to others or help to create better circumstances?



THE WOMAN TAKEN IN ADULTERY, 1644, Rembrandt (1606–1669)

PHOTOS: (L-R, T-B) PUBLIC DOMAIN, L'OSSERVATORE ROMANO

**PRAYER:** Thank you, God, for being a God of second chances. We know your love has saved us and offered us a better future. May we embrace it to the fullness you have planned. Amen.

## APRIL 14, 2019

Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord

*Luke 22:14 – 23:56*

**REFLECTION:** On Palm Sunday we hear two Gospel passages. The first welcomes Jesus into Jerusalem, and the second narrates the Last Supper, passion, and death of Jesus.

While Matthew, Mark, and Luke all include these events in their Gospels, each gives a different perspective. Since we are primarily reading Luke's Gospel at Sunday Mass this year, today his narrative is proclaimed.

There are several unique aspects of Luke's Last Supper and Passion that are worth noticing, and together they reveal that suffering and hope can exist together.

First, Jesus tells the disciples that he has "eagerly desired to eat this Passover" with them. The Passover meal required meat from a lamb that had been sacrificed at the temple. This commemorated God saving his people by using the blood of a lamb at the first Passover. Jesus' words point to both suffering and hope because Jesus fulfills the Passover on the cross. He is the new lamb whose blood is shed to save God's people.

Second, in response to the disciples arguing over who was greatest, Jesus points out that their futures are not about



**POPE FRANCIS** processing towards St. Peter's Basilica in St. Peter's Square, holding palm branches on Palm Sunday, March 29, 2015

greatness but about service. Part of this service will include trials, and challenges from Satan are coming.

Third, Jesus specifically tells Peter that he will pray for Peter to be strong so he can support the others. This shows Peter's key position in the group — and also how much he will need Jesus' help.

Fourth, Luke focuses on Jesus at prayer in the Garden. Only in this Gospel do we hear that Jesus was in such agony that he sweated blood. The word for *agony* in the Greek comes from the act of struggling in athletic endeavors to achieve a victory. Jesus and St. Paul both relate this to the struggles experienced in a believer's spiritual life (see Luke 13:24; 1 Timothy 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:7).

Two final differences happen at the crucifixion itself. First, Jesus prays, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." Jesus understands that we sin and do not always know it

## MONTH SUMMARY

### APRIL 7, 2019

Fifth Sunday of Lent

*John 8:1-11*

For those who have sinned or are facing trials, God offers a second chance for a better life.

### APRIL 14, 2019

Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord

*Luke 22:14–23:56*

The Last Supper and Passion teach us that hope and suffering can go together.

### APRIL 21, 2019

The Resurrection of the Lord

*Luke 24:1-12 and John 20:1-9*

Easter morning brings us from the darkness of sorrow into the light of hope and joy.

### APRIL 28, 2019

Second Sunday of Easter, Divine Mercy Sunday

*John 20:19-31*

In his mercy, Jesus meets us where we are so that we might have faith.

— our wounds, struggles, and circumstances sometimes bring out the worst in us instead of the best.

We also learn about two criminals crucified with Jesus. These men illustrate the two responses people make to Jesus' offer of forgiveness. One mocks him, while the other simply asks Jesus to remember him. This latter man, whose crimes were so severe that he deserved the death penalty, is the only person to whom Jesus guarantees paradise.

**FOR ADULTS:** Where do I need more of Jesus' help so that I do not deny him? Where do I struggle with following God's will? Am I depending on God to help me in my position so I can support others?

**FOR STUDENTS:** This Gospel reading is so big, it is easy to get lost. Pick one scene and make it intimate for your students. Help them enter the scene as one of the characters or as someone watching the event. What do they see, hear, smell, feel, and experience?

**PRAYER:** Thank you, Jesus, for suffering so that we might live. Help us in our struggles so that we, too, may have victory through your cross. Amen.

## APRIL 21, 2019

### The Resurrection of the Lord

*Luke 24:1-12 and John 20:1-9*

**REFLECTION:** Today we have two Gospel readings. The Easter Vigil uses Luke's scene at the empty tomb. Easter Sunday uses either that same reading or its companion from John's Gospel. The two Gospels relate the events of Easter morning somewhat

differently, but they also share many traits.

Both readings open by telling us it is the first day of the week. We can think of this "first day" as the start of something new. Just as the original creation in Genesis began with a counting of days, here we have another "first day" to initiate a new reality with Jesus' resurrection.

Both Gospels tell us that the female followers of Jesus visit the tomb early in the morning. Luke describes it as "daybreak." John states it is "early in the morning" yet "still dark."

The physical setting matches the emotional one. There is an emotional darkness due to the recent tragic death of Jesus. But just as light will soon rise over the horizon to illuminate earthly things, light will also be rising in the hearts of those closest to Jesus to illuminate spiritual things.

Which women visit the tomb varies by Gospel. All four Gospels, however, mention Mary Magdalene, so her role in the events was clearly remembered.

The women tell the disciples about the empty tomb, and Peter runs to the tomb to see for himself what has happened. Once there, he sees the burial cloths, but no Jesus. These cloths suggest that Jesus' body was not stolen. While thieves might have taken the body to obtain the spices used at the burial, why would they take the time to unwrap the body while still at the tomb?

By the end of both Gospel readings, we see a shift from sorrow to amazement as Jesus' followers realize that something extraordinary has taken place. This is a new beginning — a new phase of their lives with a new

experience of God's love and grace made available through the cross and resurrection.

**FOR ADULTS:** When we face challenging situations, it can be hard to keep moving forward. What actions do you see the followers of Jesus taking? Why? How can you find support for yourself or provide support for others in times of crisis? How can you live in the joy of Easter Sunday even when faced with difficulties?

**FOR STUDENTS:** It is popular in secular culture to say that since the Gospels do not match perfectly, they must be made-up stories. You can discuss this with students by having them discover what the Gospel readings share (see also John 20:11-18).

You can also explain how eyewitnesses can have different



PHOTO: YOEML/ISTOCK

memories, but that does not mean an event did not occur. Students probably have experienced something similar with their friends, family, or classmates. Helping them relate their own experiences to that of the Gospel authors can help them understand how the Gospels can be different yet reveal the same truth.

**PRAYER:** Thank you, God, for Easter! Thank you for the new reality in which we live now that Jesus is raised from the dead. May we embrace all you have to offer to us and live fully the new life you have made available to us. Amen.

## APRIL 28, 2019

Second Sunday of Easter,  
Divine Mercy Sunday

*John 20:19-31*

**REFLECTION:** Today we celebrate Divine Mercy Sunday. Our Gospel reading is a witness to Jesus' radical mercy to those who need help in believing.

The Gospel begins with the phrase, "On the first day of the week ... ." This reminds us that this is a time of new beginnings, new starts. Several events of the Easter season happen on Sunday: the Resurrection last week, and two events in this week's Gospel.

The first event prepares the disciples for their new roles. When the Gospel begins, they are hiding out of fear. The Jewish leadership set up Jesus to be crucified, and as his followers, the disciples can easily see themselves as the next on the list for death. On this Sunday, Jesus meets them in their need. He miraculously appears with a message of peace to offset their fear. But one of the Twelve, Thomas,

was not present. He says he will need physical proof to believe Jesus is alive. For this reason, he is known as "doubting Thomas."

It does us good to consider why Thomas might question the others. Is he fearful and worried about the Jews? Does he think that this is too good to be true? Earlier in the Gospel he was willing to die with Jesus (see John 11:16); does he now want verification before making another commitment?

Regardless of Thomas' intent, Jesus meets him where he is. A week later (again the start of a new week), Jesus appears to Thomas. He knows Thomas needs physical proof, so Jesus invites Thomas to physically touch him in an intimate way: in the very wounds that helped bring about his death. This has a huge impact on Thomas, who replies, "My Lord and my God!"

Throughout John's Gospel, Jesus has been given many different titles, but Thomas is the first to proclaim that Jesus is God. He knows Jesus is not just any God, but his personal — "my" — God. Thomas has a personal relationship with his God, who is intimate with him.

**FOR ADULTS:** One way to consider this Gospel is to ask, "Do I have a personal relationship with God? Do I know him as intimately as Thomas?" Another way to pray with this scene is to flip the roles around. Knowing that Jesus wants intimacy with us, knowing that he died in order to give us new life, do we ask him for that? Do we say to Jesus, "Put your hands into my wounds?"

**FOR STUDENTS:** Thomas teaches us the reality that some days we can be on fire for God while on



**THE INCREDULITY OF ST. THOMAS**

by Carlo Monaldi, in church  
Basilica di San Marco (1741)

others we struggle with belief. It is often not popular to admit our struggles, so you may be able to help your students give voice to what they do not understand, struggle to believe, or doubt. What might they need to more easily believe? Have them take their concerns to prayer.

**PRAYER:** Dear Jesus, thank you for showing us that you will meet us where we are. Thank you for being merciful so we can ask for help in our faith, and for being so intimate that you will respond with what each of us needs. Please help us to grow in faith this Easter Season. Amen.

# The Easter Season

## Explore the Sunday Gospels for May

CATHRYN TORGERSON

### MAY 5, 2019

Third Sunday of Easter

*John 21:1-19*

**REFLECTION:** Last week when Jesus appeared to Thomas, that moment revealed that Jesus is merciful enough to meet us in our need. That theme is repeated this week, now with a group of the disciples.

The Gospel opens as the men go fishing. They've experienced Jesus resurrected, yet now they have returned to their daily lives. We are not told why they make this choice. Has it been a while since they have seen Jesus, so they need something to do? Have they given up on Jesus? Are they simply hungry or in need of earning some money?

Their efforts at fishing prove to be futile, and then Jesus arrives. He had told them earlier in the Gospel, "Without me you can do nothing" (John 15:5), and that is proving to be true!

When he appears, the disciples do not recognize him. But they do obey his suggestion for where to fish. The result is a huge catch from the empty waters, and this causes them to realize that the man directing them is Jesus.

Jesus feeds them fish and bread for breakfast, certainly a connection to his earlier feeding of 5,000 with a few loaves and fish (see John 6:8-13). While this occasion is not a miraculous meal, it does show that Jesus provides the disciples with what they need at this moment: food.

Jesus also puts into place the system of care for the early

Christian community, with Peter in the lead as the shepherd who will feed the sheep.

Although a couple of weeks earlier Peter stood at a charcoal fire and denied knowing Jesus (see John 18:15-18), now, after this meal over a charcoal fire, Peter professes his love for Jesus. Jesus indicates that this love will lead Peter to a death similar to Jesus' own.

There are many layers of depth in this narrative. Yet at its most basic level, we see that it reveals Jesus as someone who meets us where we are in our day-to-day lives of work and eating and planning for the future. If at times we feel at loose ends or lost, simply being responsible to do the work necessary each day offers God a place to meet us.

**FOR ADULTS:** In what part of your daily life do you struggle with the responsibilities God has given you? Perhaps it is budgeting, loving a challenging child, caring for an elderly parent, or exercising. Ask God to help you there, to be your trainer, advocate, or friendly support.

**FOR STUDENTS:** While it may be somewhat natural for adults to realize how much we need God's help, it might not be so for our youth. Encourage your students to think about where they can ask Jesus for help with something that does not involve church. This could include homework, a family relationship, or caring for a pet. Have them write a prayer asking Jesus to help them with a specific need.

**PRAYER:** Thank you, Jesus, for again reminding us that you meet us where we are. You find us in the middle of our daily concerns and offer your love and help. May we always remember to call out to you and accept the grace you offer. Amen.

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### MAY 12, 2019

Fourth Sunday of Easter

*John 10:27-30*

**REFLECTION:** After several Sundays of long Gospel readings, this week's Gospel is surprisingly short, with just four verses!

These verses come from John chapter 10, where Jesus gives his most thorough explanation of what it means that he is the Good Shepherd. We hear from this teaching each year on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, so this Sunday has informally become known as Good Shepherd Sunday.

Last week's Gospel ended with Jesus explaining that Peter will be feeding Jesus' sheep. This week we hear how Jesus views his own role as the chief shepherd Peter serves. Even more, Jesus teaches about himself as God.

Initially Jesus speaks of several realities in a shepherd's life that focus on the personal relationship a shepherd has with his sheep. A shepherd has to know each member of the flock individually so he knows who needs more attention or care at any given time. The sheep have to listen to and follow the shepherd or they will get separated from the flock and lost. Everyone in Jesus' time would have understood these as truths for how shepherding works.

But Jesus also goes beyond a typical shepherd role when he

proclaims that he offers eternal life. “Eternal life” is a common phrase in John’s Gospel, used by Jesus more than a dozen times. This provides clarity about what Jesus offers: not just safety and care in this earthly life, but eternal life!

Jesus next explains how he can offer eternal life: The sheep in Jesus’ hand are also in his Father’s hand. Because the Father offers eternal life, Jesus can share that with the flock.

Finally, Jesus takes this a step further with a shocking statement: “The Father and I are one.” Throughout John’s Gospel, Jesus reveals a close relationship to his Father (see John 5:19-27; 14:1-14), but now he takes that a step further and says he is *in union* with the Father.

If we have a personal relationship with our Shepherd, and our Shepherd is one with the Father, this means that we also have a personal relationship with the Father. Jesus wants to lead us to the Father so that we can have eternal life with him.

**FOR ADULTS:** What does it mean to you to be known by Jesus in a personal way? What does it mean to follow his voice? How is it easiest for you to discern his voice from other voices in your life? Where are you most likely to try to go your own way?

**FOR STUDENTS:** Most Americans today know little about shepherding. You can have your students learn about sheep and the hard work of being a shepherd. For an example from Scripture, Psalm 23 illustrates what a shepherd needs to know – such as where to find water, food, and good paths in the desert. The shepherd’s staff keeps the sheep on the path and

the wolves at bay. After studying about shepherds, ask your students what Jesus being their shepherd means to them.

**PRAYER:** Thank you, Jesus, for being our Good Shepherd. Help us to always know that you have our best interests at heart and to trust that you will never lead us astray. Amen.

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## MAY 19, 2019

### Fifth Sunday of Easter

*John 13:31-33a, 34-35*

**REFLECTION:** We continue the Easter Season this week with the Gospel of John, and we hear about God’s glory and God’s love. Today’s Gospel takes place just after the Last Supper. Once Judas leaves to betray Jesus, Jesus gives a long speech that covers several chapters. Today’s Gospel comes from the start of this discourse, as Jesus prepares his disciples for his upcoming death and their lives after the crucifixion.

The Gospel looks at God’s glory. The word *glory* appears in the Gospel of John as a noun or verb some 30 times. For John, the greatest revelation of Jesus’ glory comes on the cross. We might not expect that, but John uses key language to show the cross as the ultimate witness of glory.

John tells us that the miracles of Jesus manifest the glory he has from the Father. But John calls these miracles “signs.” As signs, they often point to something else, quite often the cross. They are letting us know that something even greater than the sign is coming.

Glory also comes up in Jesus’ teaching. In John’s Gospel, Jesus periodically chastises people for

seeking the world’s glory rather than God’s glory. While the world’s glory involves power, recognition, and prestige, living for God’s glory means being humble. Our humility brings honor to God, and he shares his glory with us.

Jesus demonstrates that humility that glorifies God when he goes to the cross: He gives of his own life as a witness to God’s glory and love.

This love is the second part of today’s Gospel reading. Jesus prepares his disciples for life without his physical presence by commanding them to love one another. He instructs them to love as he has loved them. The disciples may have some

## MONTH SUMMARY

### MAY 5, 2019

#### Third Sunday of Easter

*John 21:1-19*

Jesus provides for the needs of his followers in their everyday lives.

### MAY 12, 2019

#### Fourth Sunday of Easter

*John 10:27-30*

Jesus explains that he is the Good Shepherd and one with the Father.

### MAY 19, 2019

#### Fifth Sunday of Easter

*John 13:31-33a, 34-35*

Jesus is glorified on the cross, and the disciples must follow his example of love.

### MAY 26, 2019

#### Sixth Sunday of Easter

*John 14:23-39*

Jesus teaches us about the Advocate who will come at Pentecost.

understanding of his love at this point, but those words will take on an even deeper meaning after the crucifixion.

Jesus also explains that their love will be a witness to the world; it will mark them as his disciples. What we see throughout the New Testament is that this love draws others to the Christians, and then through them to Jesus. This process continues with us today as the ones who are called to live in and share God's glory and love.

**FOR ADULTS:** John's Gospel is a good prompt for thinking about the glory we seek in our lives. Is it a material glory? A glory of status or title? Is it God's glory? How can we better live in and for the glory of God and not our own glory? In our day-to-day lives, how do we bring glory to God?

**FOR STUDENTS:** You might want to ask students to think about how they define glory and love. How do these relate to what Jesus reveals in his ministry, passion, and resurrection? How can your students take one step this week to be more loving or more attentive to bringing God glory?

**PRAYER:** Thank you, Jesus, for loving us so much that you went to the cross. When we face our smaller crosses, help us to remember that you are with us in them, and that by working together we can bring glory to God and share his love in the world. Amen.

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## MAY 26, 2019

Sixth Sunday of Easter

John 14:23-39

**REFLECTION:** Last week Jesus commanded the disciples to love one another. The source of love is

God, and this week we hear how God's love will be made available to the disciples.

Like last Sunday's Gospel, today's reading comes from the teaching Jesus gives prior to his death. He is preparing the disciples for their lives after his ascension.

The Gospel begins with Jesus explaining that those who love Jesus will receive two things: the love of the Father, and the Father and Jesus dwelling with them.

But Jesus will be leaving when he ascends. If he is going to the Father, how will he and the Father dwell with the disciples? How will their love impact the disciples so they can love one another?

Jesus provides the answer: The Father will send the Advocate (sometimes translated as Comforter, Counselor, or Helper) to the disciples. This Advocate is the Holy Spirit.

The Greek word translated as "Advocate" is *paraclete*. It comes from two words meaning "next to" and "call." These words create the image of the Holy Spirit as someone who is with us and calls to us. Jesus explains that the Advocate will teach us and help us to remember what we need.

Elsewhere in this discourse, Jesus explains that the Spirit will dwell in us (see John 14:16-17), bear witness to Jesus (see John 15:26), convict the world of sin and judgment (see John 16:7-11), and guide us into truth (see John 16:13). Previously Jesus has related the Spirit to new birth (see John 3:5-8), a gift from God (see John 3:34), and living water (see John 7:37-39).

Through John's Gospel, we discover the Holy Spirit is our Advocate who can help us in a variety of ways. He is an actual Person, a member of the Trinity in relationship with us.

The Holy Spirit is sent on Pentecost. For the next couple of weeks, the daily Mass readings will periodically remind us of his coming. We should begin to prepare ourselves for this celebration of God's dwelling with us in our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

**FOR ADULTS:** Think about the various ways the Holy Spirit can be your Advocate. You may want to read the above verses to discover the scope of what Jesus teaches about him. Where do you need more of his advocacy in your life? Pray about that regularly to prepare for Pentecost.

**FOR STUDENTS:** This provides an opportunity for catechesis on the Holy Spirit. We were baptized into his name and are sealed with him at Confirmation. One way this dual experience is explained is that in Baptism we are brought into a community of faith, and then in Confirmation we are sent out to bring others in. Both of these involve experiencing and sharing God's love as Jesus commands.

What does it mean to your students that they are a part of a faith community? Is there someone inside or outside this community with whom they can share the faith? How can they better love someone in their lives?

**PRAYER:** Dearest Trinity, you made possible our salvation because you love us. You also help us to love you and one another. Guide us as we go forth to the summer months to love more deeply and share more freely the gift of your love with others.



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