

Matthew  
Year A

ON EARTH AS IT IS  
IN HEAVEN

The Spiritual Wisdom  
of the Gospels for  
Christian Preachers  
and Teachers



JOHN SHEA

**The Spiritual Wisdom  
of the Gospels for  
Christian Preachers  
and Teachers**

*Year A*

*On Earth as It Is in Heaven*

John Shea



LITURGICAL PRESS

Collegeville, Minnesota

[www.litpress.org](http://www.litpress.org)

Cover design by Joachim Rhoades, O.S.B.

© 2004 by the Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, by print, microfilm, microfiche, mechanical recording, photocopying, translation, or by any other means, known or yet unknown, for any purpose except brief quotations in reviews, without the previous written permission of the Liturgical Press, Saint John's Abbey, P.O. Box 7500, Collegeville, Minnesota 56321-7500. Printed in the United States of America.

The Library of Congress has cataloged the printed edition as follows:

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Shea, John, 1941–

The spiritual wisdom of the Gospels for Christian preachers and teachers  
/ John Shea.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8146-2913-X (Year A : pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Bible. N.T. Gospels—Criticism, interpretation, etc. 2. Bible.  
N.T. Gospels—Homiletical use. 3. Lectionary preaching. I. Title.

BS2555.52.S54 2004

251'.6—dc22

2003025635

# Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Preface	
<i>Writing this Resource</i>	xi
Introduction	
<i>Preaching and Teaching the Gospels as Spiritual Wisdom</i>	1
First Sunday of Advent	
<i>Staying Awake in Everyday Life</i>	25
Second Sunday of Advent	
<i>Leading the Heart</i>	30
Third Sunday of Advent	
<i>Opening to Wholeness</i>	37
Fourth Sunday of Advent	
<i>Making a Home for Spirit</i>	43
The Baptism of the Lord	
<i>Awakening to Love</i>	49
Second Sunday in Ordinary Time / Second Sunday after Epiphany	
<i>Tracking Testimony</i>	55
Third Sunday in Ordinary Time / Third Sunday after Epiphany	
<i>Following Fascination</i>	63
Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Fourth Sunday after Epiphany	
<i>Uncovering Blessedness</i>	67
Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Fifth Sunday after Epiphany	
<i>Becoming Salt</i>	73
Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Sixth Sunday after Epiphany / Proper 1	
<i>Working on Yourself</i>	76
Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time / Seventh Sunday after Epiphany / Proper 2	
<i>Cultivating Cleverness</i>	83

iv Contents

Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Eighth Sunday after Epiphany /  
Proper 3

*Beholding Birds and Flowers* 88

Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Ninth Sunday after Epiphany /  
Proper 4

*Withstanding Storms* 93

Transfiguration Sunday

*Visiting the Mountain* 97

First Sunday of Lent

*Knowing Who You Are* 103

Second Sunday of Lent (*Revised Common Lectionary*)

*Serving Spirit through Theology* 108

Third Sunday of Lent

*Disappearing into the Fullness of Joy* 116

Fourth Sunday of Lent

*Completing Creation* 130

Fifth Sunday of Lent

*Causing and Consoling Grief* 142

Second Sunday of Easter

*Resurrecting with Questions* 155

Third Sunday of Easter

*Sacrificing into Life* 166

Fourth Sunday of Easter

*Entering through the Gate of Christ* 177

Fifth Sunday of Easter

*Calming Troubled Hearts* 182

Sixth Sunday of Easter

*Dancing Beyond Death* 186

Seventh Sunday of Easter

*Finishing Life* 191

Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 5

*Learning the Meaning of Mercy* 197

Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 6

*Protesting the Way Things Are* 203

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 7	
<i>Choosing to Speak the Truth Despite Suffering</i>	207
Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 8	
<i>Prioritizing Love</i>	214
Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 9	
<i>Experiencing Rest</i>	218
Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 10	
<i>Loving the Listener</i>	225
Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 11	
<i>Progressing Humiliation by Humiliation</i>	230
Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 12	
<i>Selling with Joy</i>	236
Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 13	
<i>Maximizing Assets</i>	241
Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 14	
<i>Sinking with Courage</i>	246
Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 15	
<i>Doing What It Takes</i>	252
Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 16	
<i>Getting It Right</i>	257
Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 17	
<i>Finding and Losing Life</i>	262
Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 18	
<i>Reconciling with Spirit and Skill</i>	267
Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 19	
<i>Bestowing the Future</i>	272
Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 20	
<i>Comparing Salaries</i>	279
Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 21	
<i>Changing Our Minds</i>	286
Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 22	
<i>Wanting It All</i>	291

vi *Contents*

Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 23

*Marrying the Son* 297

Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 24

*Avoiding Traps* 302

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 25

*Returning to Love* 306

Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 26

*Practicing and Repenting* 310

Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 27

*Lighting Your Own Lamp* 314

Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 28

*Fearing God* 319

Christ the King / Proper 29

*Caring Without Calculation* 325

Scripture Index 330

## Acknowledgments

This four-volume set, *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers*, has been a long time in the making. Along the way, there have been many collaborators, people whose critical comments and ongoing support have kept me thinking, meditating, and writing about Gospel texts. Although it is impossible to mention every student or workshop participant who asked a question or volunteered a comment that improved my understanding and articulation, I am thankful to all of them.

In particular, there have been some key organizations, congregations, and people who have told me, "This is useful," "Keep doing it," "Stay here," "Talk to us," "What do you need," and "When are you ever going to put this stuff in print." This is what writers yearn to hear, so I am grateful:

To Lilly Endowment, Inc., especially to Fred Hofheinz, who saw the contribution a spiritual-literary interpretation of Gospel texts would make to Christian preachers and teachers and graciously and generously funded this project.

To Rev. Jack Wall, Roger Hughes, Al Hellwig, Bob Kolatorwicz, and the staff and community of Old St. Patrick's Church who pioneered Awakenings, an early morning group of Gospel lovers, and became the home base for this project.

To the ecumenical advisory group: Rev. Wayne Priest of Queen of All Saints Basilica, Rev. Dean Francis of First United Methodist Church of Evanston, Rev. Paul Koch of Ebenezer Lutheran Church, Canon Linda Bartholomew of Christ Church Cathedral, and Rev. Carol Allen of Fourth Presbyterian Church. These creative Christian preachers and teachers from the Catholic, Methodist, Lutheran, Episcopalian, and Presbyterian traditions took their time and focused their talent on reading and evaluating the Sunday-by-Sunday spiritual commentaries and teachings.

To Rev. Andrew Greeley, John Cusick, Edward Beck and many others who offered insights I eagerly received.

To Robert Demke, who gave much-needed computer advice and administrative assistance.



viii *Acknowledgments*

To Grace Lutheran Congregation and School, for their gracious hospitality.

To Peter Dwyer, director, Mark Twomey, Rev. Cyril Gorman, O.S.B., Rev. Linda Maloney, Colleen Stiller, and all the staff at the Liturgical Press for their interest in this project and their expertise in helping to implement it.

Finally, to Anne, companion, lover, wife, friend of the Spirit.



Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible: Catholic Edition. Copyright © 1989, 1993, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by license of the copyright holder. All rights reserved.

Where noted, Scripture texts in this work are taken from the *New American Bible with Revised New Testament and Revised Psalms*. Copyright © 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C., and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All rights reserved. No part of the *New American Bible* may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

Where noted, Scripture texts in this work are taken from the King James Version of the Bible, available on the Internet at <http://www.bibles.net/> (accessed March 5, 2004).

Introductory words that are added to the Gospel pericopes are based on what is found in *Lectionary for Worship*, Ritual Edition, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996), a presentation of the *Revised Common Lectionary*. Copyright © 1992 by the Consultation on Common Texts (CCT), 1522 K Street NW, Suite 1000, Washington, D.C. 20005-1202. All rights reserved.

Pages 12, 126, 211, 236, and 317: Excerpts from the Gospel of Thomas trans. Stephen Patterson and Marvin Meyer in *The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version*, ed. Robert J. Miller, rev. ed., Sonoma, Calif.: Polebridge Press, 1994. Reprinted with permission.

Page 40: Excerpt of "What Am I Leaving Out?" from *Tales of a Magic Monastery* by Theophane the Monk. Copyright © 1981 by Crossroad. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.

Page 41: Excerpt from *A Little Book on the Human Shadow* by Robert Bly; edited by William Booth (San Francisco: Harper & Row). Reprinted with permission from HarperCollins Publishers, Inc. Copyright © 1988 by Robert Bly.

Page 71: Fourth stanza of “Vacillation” reprinted for sale in the U.S.A. with the permission of Scribner, an imprint of Simon & Schuster Adult Publishing Group, from *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, vol. 1, *The Poems, Revised*, edited by Richard J. Finneran. Copyright © 1933 by The MacMillan Company; copyright renewed © 1961 by Bertha Georgie Yeats. Reprinted for sale outside of the U.S.A. with the permission of AP Watt Ltd. on behalf of Michael B. Yeats.

Pages 95–96: “Tickets for a Prayer Wheel” reprinted from *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel* by Annie Dillard, by permission of the University of Missouri Press. Copyright © 1974 by Annie Dillard.

Page 117: *Rumi—Fragments, Ecstasies*, translated by Daniel Liebert, Omega Publications (N.Y.), 1999. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.

Page 224: Selected lines of “The Swan” from *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*, edited and translated by Robert Bly. Copyright © 1981 by Robert Bly. Reprinted with permission from HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.

Page 224: Selected lines of “Pax” by D. H. Lawrence from *The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence*, by D. H. Lawrence, edited by V. de Sola Pinto and F. W. Roberts, copyright © 1964, 1971 by Angelo Ravagli and C. M. Weekley, Executors of the Estate of Frieda Lawrence Ravagli. Used by permission of Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Group (U.S.A.) Inc. In the United Kingdom, copyright © Laurence Pollinger, Ltd., London. Reprinted with permission.

Page 299: Excerpts from the English translation of *Rite of Baptism for Children* copyright © 1969, International Committee on English in the Liturgy, Inc. All rights reserved.

Pages 308–9: Story and excerpt from *How Can I Help?: Stories and Reflections on Service* by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987. Copyright © 1985 by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman. Reprinted with permission.

# First Sunday of Advent

Matthew 24:36-44



## Staying Awake in Everyday Life

*A Spiritual Commentary*

**[Jesus said to the disciples:] “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven nor the Son, but only the Father.**

God, the mysterious and transcendent Father, is the only reality who knows when the event called “the coming of the Son of Man” will happen. So we on earth cannot plan for it in the normal way. Since we do not know when it will arrive, we cannot schedule our preparation. We do not know when we should stop doing “business as usual,” focus our attention and energy on the upcoming event, and start getting ready. The way we prepare for the “coming of the Son of Man” will have to be different.

**For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man.**

Although we do not know *when* it will come, we do know something about *how* it will come. It will be like it was in the days of Noah. Although the people in the “days before the flood” were usually considered evildoers, this is not what St. Matthew’s Jesus stresses. He characterizes them as caught up in the everyday affairs of life—eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage. There is nothing wrong with these activities except that they are all consuming. They keep them from “knowing” something deeper, something of vital importance for their well-being. They are ill prepared, and so the flood carries them away. “[T]he coming of the Son of Man” has an element of danger in it if you are inattentive. Therefore, the preparation project for the “coming of the Son of Man” is not to be caught unaware.

**Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left.**

These two images continue the themes of everyday life and danger. Preparation for the day of the Lord does not mean stopping everyday life. Both men, the one “taken” into the kingdom and the one left behind, are out in the field. Both women, the one “taken” into the kingdom and the one left behind, are grinding at the mill. It is not that one is out in the field and the other is praying, or that one is grinding at the mill and the other is in the temple. So the encouragement of the text is not the strategy of traditional piety—to quit the tasks of everyday life and engage in religious activity, especially when you know a major religious moment is about to occur.

So where is the difference between these two men and women? If both are doing the same things, why is one taken and one left?

The text does not explicitly consider this question. But the context suggests that inner vigilance and awareness make the difference. On the visible, outer level both men and both women are the same. Therefore, the difference must be interior. It must be on the level of awareness. Attentiveness seems to be the lesson to draw from the comparison of the “days of Noah” and the day of “the coming of the Son of Man.” And, in the next line, the storyteller makes it explicit in a bold injunction:

**Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.**

The event called “the coming of the Son of Man” is now also properly called “the day of the Lord.” Although we do not know when it will come, its importance for the well-being of people is strongly stressed. The negative images of being swept away in a flood and left behind in the field or at the mill are complemented by the image of having your house broken into. Not to be ready for this day is to suffer severe consequences.

However, everything hinges on how “the coming of the Son of Man” and “the day of the Lord” is understood. A literal approach sees it as the cosmic coming of an end-time figure in an outer, visible way to judge the

living and dead. There will come a day when Jesus will return and those who have fallen asleep, who have not faithfully practiced his teachings, will be judged negatively. We cannot prepare for this judgment at the last minute for we do not know when the last minute will be. Therefore, enlightened self-interest would dictate ongoing, scrupulous observance.

The difficulty of this approach is connecting fidelity to Jesus' teachings with a coming but not-yet-arrived cosmic event. When the second coming does not come, it is difficult to stay poised and waiting. Even when we are assured that second coming delayed is not second coming denied, vigilant awareness devolves into "hoping to hear in time." When a questioner asked Pope John XXIII what he would advise people in the Vatican to do if he heard Christ was coming a second time, he responded, "Look busy." This great comic line depicts the ordinary way we think. The thunderous command to "stay awake" is reduced to "wake me when he's near." And if he is never near or if people have cried "wolf" too often and said he was near but he was not, the rationale for fidelity and attentiveness is undercut.

But "the coming of the Son of Man" and "the day of the Lord" can be understood in a different way. They can be interpreted as symbolic code for God's invitation into the fullness of human life through Christ. The Lord is eternally present to human life, creating, judging, redeeming, and calling it to fullness. However, we are often not aware of this permeating divine activity. When, through the teachings of Jesus, God's redeeming presence enters human consciousness, it is "the day of the Lord" and the "Son of Man" has arrived. We never know when this will happen. So we must "stay awake through the night." This breakthrough can happen at any time. When it does and our attentiveness receives its gracious communication, we are dry in Noah's ark, taken into the Kingdom, and safe in our own house. "[Y]ou know what time it is . . . it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep" (Rom 13:11).

### *Teaching*

There is a story entitled, "What is the World Like?":

God and a man are walking down the road. The man asks God, "What is the world like?"

God replies, "I cannot talk when I am thirsty. If you could get me a drink of cool water, we could discuss what the world is like. There is a village nearby. Go and get me a drink."

The man goes into the village and knocks at the door of the first house. A comely young woman opens the door. His jaw drops, but he manages to say, "I need a glass of cool water."

"Of course," she says, smiling, "but it is midday. Would you care to stay for some food?"

"I *am* hungry," he says, looking over his shoulder. "And your offer of food is a great kindness."

He goes in and the door closes behind him.

Thirty years go by. The man who wanted to know what the world was like and the woman who offered him food have married and raised five children. He is a respected merchant and she is an honored member of the community. One day a terrible storm comes in off the ocean and threatens their life. The merchant cries out, "Help me, God."

A voice from the midst of the storm says, "Where is my cup of cold water?"

Spiritual traditions always warn people about becoming lost in the world. (They also warn about being lost in God, but that's another issue.) The demands of everyday life are merciless. There is always more to do and not enough time to do it. A friend of mine wants inscribed on her tomb the saying, "It's always something." At times this constant activity may be boring; at other times it may be exciting. But from the point of view of the story it breeds lack of attention to the demands of God.

What is the world like? The answer of the story is that it is a place of forgetfulness. Or, in the metaphor of Matthew's text, it is a place where we fall asleep. We do not stay attentive to the spiritual dimension of life. Eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, working in the field, and grinding at the mill take all our time and, more importantly, take all our mind. When this happens, we find ourselves lacking passion, purpose, and pleasure. As one perplexed person put it, "How can I be so busy and yet so empty?"

This dominance of everyday activity is particularly true in the Christmas season. Already busy people become busier. They have to prepare for the season, which often means more shopping and more work. Unfortunately, this frantic preparation often puts people to sleep spiritually. People begin to long not for the birth of the Christmas Christ, but for the lazy, doldrums days of January. The rush of the season works against the message of the season.

Almost everyone has experienced his or her spirits being depleted and even defeated. However, often the alarm does not go off. We toler-

ate what T.S. Eliot called, "living and partly living." We wrongly treat spirit as a luxury. If our bodies are hurting, we will pay attention to them and work hard to recover our physical health. If our financial security or social status is under attack, we will struggle and fight ceaselessly for our money and position. But we will allow our spirit to languish and even atrophy. This tendency to neglect spirit may be the underlying insight of Matthew into the people of Noah's time. They valued everything but the Spirit that ultimately sustained them.

How are we to keep spiritually aware in the midst of everyday activity? How are we to keep awake while working in the field and grinding at the mill? This is not easy. We may have the desire, but we may lack the know-how. And to shout the command, "stay awake!" (v. 42; NAB) as St. Matthew's Jesus does, may strengthen commitment, but it does not show a way forward. We need to complement desire with strategies.

Some friends of mine, long-time victims of the stress of everyday activities, suggest smuggling spiritual exercises into the world of work. A Jewish doctor says a Hebrew prayer of purification every time she washes her hands. She explains that the prayer is not meant to purify but to remind her that the person she is treating is more than their disease. In other words, she stays awake to the spiritual dimension of people while she attends to their bodily distress.

A man pauses before a Christmas tree in the building where he works. He brings to mind the connection between heaven and earth and ponders the theological truth that creation is grounded in God. He says that as long as he holds onto this truth, his day goes better. "I notice more. I see the deeper sides of people. And I'm more patient, and respectful." The awareness of Spirit brings pleasure, passion, and purpose.

Spiritual exercises help us "stay awake through the night." These exercises may be the rituals and prayers of a faith tradition that we engage in with other people. But they may also be home grown practices. Personal "things" we have learned to cultivate in order to stay focused on the deeper dimension of life. These practices become the path to the Gospel value of constant, vigilant awareness. And constant, vigilant awareness is the precondition in order to know and respond to the "coming of the Son of Man" and the arrival of the "day of the Lord."