

Everyday Connections

*Reflections and
Practices for Year B*

Edited by Heidi Haverkamp

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Praise for the Series

“What a rich devotional! Scripture—beribboned with trenchant questions, goading insights, and invitations to sit, to pray, to write. Invitations to read Zora Neale Hurston and W. H. Auden. Yes, please!”

— Lauren F. Winner, author of *Wearing God*

“Offering excerpts from the biblical text and the Connections commentary series, questions for deeper reflection, *lectio divina*, and space for personal reflection and thoughts, *Everyday Connections* provides a rich and essential resource to strengthen and support your spiritual and devotional practice.”

— Song-Mi Suzie Park, Associate Professor of Old Testament,
Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary

“Given the richness of this devotional companion to the Connections commentary, I can’t imagine it sitting on your shelf unused! Designed with simplicity yet filled with depth, it is a resource that will help you engage Scripture and life both more fully and more joyfully. The flexibility built into its use—individually, in small groups, and in relation to worship—gives this guide longevity well beyond a particular lectionary year.”

— Marjorie Thompson, author of *Soul Feast*

“In days of great tumult and stress, the guided meditations on Scripture and the prompts to prayer collected in *Everyday Connections* are a welcome balm and generous call to heed God’s voice in the everyday life of those of us who yearn to follow Jesus. In days of joy and hope, this same book invites believers to praise a God whose word shows us the way of faithfulness and whose grace is ever abounding.”

— Eric D. Barreto, Frederick and Margaret L.
Weyerhaeuser Associate Professor of New Testament,
Princeton Theological Seminary

“Everyday Connections leads readers through the spiritual practice of centering our heads and hearts in faithful reflection and connection. It resources the writings of the Bible as well as the broader spiritual and intellectual resources of the Christian tradition, inviting us to link Christian wisdom, images, and teachings to the lived experiences of our communities and the communities of others. I commend this resource to pastors, chaplains, laypeople, and teachers engaged in the hermeneutical task of rendering biblical texts meaningful for our contemporary realities. If you seek to cultivate fresh engagement with the Bible, communities, the Christian lectionary calendar, and the self and to have fresh voices accompany you along the way, this resource can guide you in that endeavor.”

— Shively T. J. Smith, Assistant Professor of New Testament,
Boston University

ALSO AVAILABLE IN THIS SERIES

Everyday Connections: Reflections and Practices for Year C

Everyday Connections: Reflections and Practices for Year A

A Note from the Publisher

This devotional resource is part of the series *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*. *Connections* embodies two complementary convictions about the study of Scripture. First, to best understand an individual passage of Scripture, we should put it in conversation with the rest of the Bible. Second, since all truth is God's truth, we should bring as many "lenses" as possible to the study of Scripture, drawn from as many sources as we can find. The essential idea of *Connections* is that biblical texts display their power most fully when they are allowed to interact with a number of contexts, that is, when many connections are made between a biblical text and realities outside that text. Like the two poles of a battery, when the pole of the biblical text is connected to a different pole (another aspect of Scripture or a dimension of life outside Scripture), creative sparks fly and energy surges from pole to pole.

Based on the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), which has wide ecumenical use, *Connections* offers hundreds of essays on the full array of biblical passages in the three-year cycle. Two major interpretive essays, called *Commentary 1* and *Commentary 2*, address every scriptural reading in the RCL. *Commentary 1* explores connections between a lectionary reading and other texts and themes within Scripture, and *Commentary 2* makes connections between the lectionary texts and themes in the larger culture outside of Scripture. These essays have been written by pastors, biblical scholars, theologians, and others.

During the seasons of the Christian year (Advent through Epiphany and Lent through Pentecost), the RCL provides three readings and a psalm or canticle for each Sunday and feast day: (1) a first reading, usually from the Old Testament; (2) a psalm or canticle, chosen to respond to the first reading; (3) a second reading, usually from one of the New Testament epistles; and (4) a Gospel reading. The first and second readings are chosen as complements to the Gospel reading for the day.

During the time between Pentecost and Advent, the RCL includes an additional first reading for every Sunday. There is the usual complementary reading, chosen in relation to the Gospel reading, but there is also a "semi-continuous" reading. These semicontinuous first readings move through the

books of the Old Testament more or less continuously in narrative sequence, offering the stories of the patriarchs (Year A), the kings of Israel (Year B), and the prophets (Year C). *Connections* covers both the complementary and the semicontinuous readings.

Because not all lectionary days are used in a given year, depending on how the calendar falls, you may not need some of the readings here until a subsequent lectionary cycle. Check the official RCL website at <http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu> for a list of readings for the current year.

We want to thank the many talented individuals who made *Connections* possible: our general editors, Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby, and Carolyn J. Sharp; Psalms editor Kimberly Bracken Long and sidebar editors Bo Adams and Rachel Toombs; the esteemed members of our editorial board; our superb slate of writers; and our indefatigable project manager Joan Murchison. Finally, our sincere thanks to the administration, faculty, and staff of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, our institutional partner in producing *Connections*.

We are deeply grateful to Heidi Haverkamp for her exhaustive editorial and creative work developing *Everyday Connections* for the spiritual enrichment of every Christian who desires to delve deeply into Scripture. This insightful volume pairs weekly texts and reflections with prompts, prayers, and practices to spark connections between the Bible and everyday life as well as nurture one's own connection with the Divine.

Westminster John Knox Press

How to Use This Book

In this book, you will find a panoply of modes and methods for reflection on the Sunday readings of the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B. Some are serious, some are playful, some are personal, some are relational, some are pastoral, some are prophetic, some are practical, some are poetic; all are centered in Christ's radical call and love for us. Whether you want to deepen your prayer life, your grasp of Scripture, your small-group discussions, your sermon preparation, or some other aspect of your Christian life and relationship with God, I hope you will discover in these pages a wide variety of resources, information, ideas, questions, and spiritual practices to support you.

Your conversation partners for each week's reflections are excerpts from the Connections preaching and worship commentary series, also published by Westminster John Knox Press. The series is a treasure trove of background and insights, with essays on each Scripture passage written by Bible scholars, theologians, and pastors. They are easy to read but offer significant historical and linguistic information, theological reflection, connections across the biblical text, and connections from the text to social and cultural realities in our world. Choosing a single excerpt from so many of these essays was incredibly challenging. There are great riches to be found in the full commentaries, for those seeking more.

There are many ways Everyday Connections can guide and strengthen your Christian life, leadership, and community, depending on what works best for you, your group, or your congregation in any given week:

- Personal reflection: use for prayer, study, meditation, and journaling
- Sermon or worship preparation: explore ideas, get inspired, and prepare to preach or plan worship
- Small groups: see the appendix for a suggested format to use Everyday Connections as a curriculum or study text
- Teaching: study and reflect as you prepare to teach a Bible study or class of any age
- Meetings: use an excerpt as an opening meditation or discussion for staff or committee meetings

- Beyond church: use on visits to individuals or groups in a hospital, assisted living facility, prison, or other social agency, or as part of a mission trip, retreat, or conference

Here are some other suggestions to get the most from this devotional:

Use alongside a Bible. Since this book offers only short excerpts from Scripture for the sake of length, reading the full passage in your Bible will expand your perspective.

Choose what to study. Each week of reflections offers multiple options and ideas for engagement with the texts. Focus on whatever is speaking to you that day. Or, over time, you may discover certain exercises or modules work best for you. Do not feel that you need to interact with every single entry, every single week.

Choose what order. Reflections have been laid out in a certain order, but you can use them in any order you like.

Choose what frequency. You may want to use this book every day, studying one or two entries at a time, or just once or twice a week, studying several or most of a week's entries at once.

The material for each week is divided into these sections:

1. **A Scripture Overview.** On the first page of each week, a selection of verses excerpted from that week's readings gives you a sense of what to expect. (Excerpts from psalms and canticles are omitted in the season after Pentecost in order to accommodate excerpts from the two Old Testament tracks.) Then, a shortened form of **Lectio Divina**, Latin for "holy reading," is suggested, as a way to begin to reflect on the week's Scriptures: choose a phrase or a few words that speak to you, then listen in prayer or meditation for what God might be saying to you through those words. Benedictine monks have prayed in this way for centuries.
2. **Themes from This Week's Writers.** Two themes, drawn from the week's commentary essays, are suggested for study, reflection, or sermon preparation. Brief quotes from the essays that support the theme are provided. See if the commentators' words inspire you or other connections emerge for you. A **Spiritual Practice** associated with the themes or liturgical season is also suggested. The practice

- can be done on your own, as a family, with a friend or prayer partner, or as a small-group activity, and on any day of the week.
3. **First Reading, Cantic, Second Reading, and Gospel.** A deeper dive into four of the week's readings (five for Palm/Passion Sunday and six for Easter Sunday) includes a verse or two of Scripture, an excerpt from a commentary essay, some reflection questions, and a brief prayer. These reflections will invite you to make connections that (usually) go in different directions from the two themes. You could read one each day, read them all at once, or pick just one or two to read, depending on the week.
 4. **Weekend Reflections.** Choose a way to wrap up the week's study and Scripture connections, perhaps on the day you are sitting down to write a sermon or plan worship. First, a **Further Connection** is offered: a quote from a source outside of Scripture and the commentary essays, which may speak to you in a new way or deepen a connection you have made with a theme or reading already that week. Full sources and citations for these quotes are available in the appendix. **Making the Connections** invites you to consider one of four questions (repeated each week) to focus your reflections and connections from the readings to a conclusion, sermon, or final theme for the week. **My Connections** provides extra space to write your own notes.
 5. **Sabbath Day.** These exercises are meant to be done on a day you consider the end of the week or a day off. The **Scripture of Assurance** is meant to offer solace—and sometimes a little humor—to a weary soul. The **Weekly Examen** is adapted from the daily examen of Ignatius of Loyola. It can be done on your own, as a family, with a friend or prayer partner, or in a small group.

Again, choose what speaks to you; do not feel you need to engage every single section. The options in this book were designed to be used in different combinations to suit the needs of different readers, contexts, and schedules.

A few sections use slightly different formats:

Christmas Week. For this busy holiday time, a single week of reflections draws on the Scriptures from both Christmas and the Sunday after Christmas, since many of the readings and themes overlap and complement one another.

Weekday Holy Days. Five significant holy days always or usually fall on weekdays: Epiphany, Ash Wednesday, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Ascension of the Lord. Each has a separate, shortened entry (appearing before the start of the week leading up to the following Sunday) that includes Scripture quotes, excerpts from the commentary essays, a reflection question, and a prayer.

All Saints'. There is a full week of entries for All Saints' Day (November 1) or All Saints' Sunday (the first Sunday following November 1). Note that your congregation may celebrate Proper 26 or Proper 27 instead, depending on whether All Saints' is commemorated in your tradition or perhaps celebrated on November 1, proper, rather than the Sunday following.

May God bless you richly as you explore, study, connect, and pray your way through the pages of this book and God's Word as it is proclaimed in the lectionary cycle of Year B.

Heidi Haverkamp

The week leading up to the
First Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 64:1–9

Make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!
When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
(vv. 2b–3)

Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19

But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,
the one whom you made strong for yourself.
Then we will never turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call on your name. (vv. 17–18)

1 Corinthians 1:3–9

For in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind—just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you—so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. (vv. 5–7)

Mark 13:24–37

Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. (vv. 30–31)

LECTIO DIVINA

Underline a word or phrase that especially grabs your attention. Pray from that word or phrase and ask God to help you connect to its particular invitation for you this week.

Themes from This Week's Writers

THEME 1: *God the Disrupter*

Isaiah 64:1–9

For Isaiah and Mark, God appears from outside the human realm (on earth) because God's true dwelling is above (in the heavens). God breaking into the space humans occupy naturally disrupts the present order and dramatically changes it.

JEROME F. D. CREACH

Mark 13:24–37

Amid the prospect of this final shakeup and shutdown of the nefarious world system pulses the promise of *another Power* coming from heaven to earth, bringing heaven to earth, re-creating heaven and earth from their crumbling, decaying present state . . . to their original "very good" design (Gen. 1:31). This renewing force is in fact a *Person*.

F. SCOTT SPENCER

Mark 13:24–37

Mark's apocalyptic predictions of the arrival of the Messiah prevent the church from sliding into the pagan comforts of the pre-Christmas season. The Messiah's return is going to rock the world and your life. Get ready!

ANDREW FOSTER CONNORS

THEME 2: *The Long View of Hope*

Isaiah 64:1–9

This passage invites its hearers to a quest both daunting and full of promise. How do we grasp an understanding of a God whose appearing is forceful and strong, whose presence can be transformative or consuming, who demands fealty even though the event horizon of our imagination is beyond our view?

GLEN BELL

Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19

As William Sloane Coffin once put it, “hope criticizes what is, hopelessness rationalizes it. Hope resists, hopelessness adapts.”¹ . . . [Psalm 80 is] a criticism of what is and an affirmation of hope in the new selves, the new church, and the new world that God is making possible.

J. CLINTON MCCANN JR.

1 Corinthians 1:3–9

Paul’s greeting and call into fellowship with Christ are extremely important, because inherent in such thought is that we do not have to worry about beginnings and endings, as long as we live in God. The vocation of a Christian inhabiting God is to see the limitless in the limited.

MICHAEL BATTLE

WHAT IS THE HOLY SPIRIT SAYING TO YOU THIS WEEK?

A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE THIS WEEK

Disrupt Advent: make a surprising or ugly Advent wreath with household items. Incorporate the traditional theme words: hope, peace, joy, love. What does this wreath say for you about the meaning of Advent this year?

1. William Sloane Coffin, *A Passion for the Possible: A Message to U.S. Churches*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 88.

First Reading

Isaiah 64:1–9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—
as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil. (vv. 1–2a)

REFLECTION

When Isaiah 63:15 calls for God to “look down from heaven,” it imagines God in this dwelling place far above the earth. God expresses zeal for God’s people by coming down from the heavenly abode to attend their circumstances. This conception, in turn, sets up the opening line of our lection. “Tear open the heavens and come down” assumes the dome of heaven is a barrier to God’s presence with the people. Thus the prayer is not just for God to “look down,” but to rip a hole in the dome and descend.

JEROME F. D. CREACH

RESPONSE

Does God feel far away this Advent? Do you feel a barrier between God and yourself? How are you longing for God to “tear open the heavens” and be close and present this week? Are you surprised by Isaiah’s hope that God’s presence will be like burning wood and boiling water?

PRAYER

God of zeal, tear open the heavens and come down, that I might know your unmistakable presence this Advent. Amen.

Canticle

Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19

Stir up your might,
and come to save us!
Restore us, O God;
let your face shine, that we may be saved. (vv. 2b–3)

REFLECTION

Both [Isaiah and Psalm 80] suggest that something is desperately wrong in the life of God’s people. Their pain is poignant and palpable. “Tears” are mentioned twice in Psalm 80:5, and “the bread of tears” here may be an intentional contrast to “the bread of the Presence,” or more literally, “the bread of the [God’s] face” . . . that resided in the temple but was no longer available. The lament continues in verse 6, and it accords well with the description of distress in Isaiah 64:6–7, which contains the complaint that God has “hidden your face from us” (Ps. 80:7).

J. CLINTON MCCANN JR.

RESPONSE

What is going wrong in your life this Advent? Is pain, frustration, or fear present for you? Write an Advent lament in the spirit of Psalm 80, either for yourself, your church, or your nation.

PRAYER

Stir up your might and restore me, O God. Make your face to shine upon me, this one whom you have made strong for yourself. Amen.

Second Reading

1 Corinthians 1:3–9

You are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (vv. 7–9)

REFLECTION

There is a gulf of sensibility between the heightened state of “watching” and the intentional slowness of “waiting.” The disciples in Jesus’ illustration are permitted neither sleep nor Sabbath. Paul, on the contrary, would insist on both, as regular reminders of the provision granted elsewhere. While both “watching” and “waiting” are clearly vital to the total imagination of the Christian life, the frenzy of our modern twenty-four-hour news cycle seems to make watchfulness the anxious default. Perhaps we need some reminding of what it is, instead, to wait quietly.

MATT GAVENTA

RESPONSE

What does the word “waiting” usually mean to you? For a day or more make “waiting” your spiritual practice. For instance: do not rush, wait your turn, choose to wait longer when given an option. Could it feel like a spiritual gift?

PRAYER

Loving God, I am not lacking in any spiritual gift. Teach me to release the frenzy of working and watching so I may rest in waiting for your coming among us. Amen.

Gospel

Mark 13:24–37

“Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.” (vv. 35–37)

REFLECTION

The text suggests that the role of believers may [be] . . . to hold fast, especially in times when victory is not in sight. . . .

Eugene Peterson, speaking at a ministers’ conference, once compared the church to the movement of a glacier. The advance of a glacier is a slow process, moving on average less than one meter per day; but the glacier’s movement crushes and redistributes rock, carving out canyons, making way for rivers, moving the earth in extraordinary ways. Staying true to God’s way may not move mountains in a quick moment, but in God’s time it reshapes the world in the church’s wake.

ANDREW FOSTER CONNORS

RESPONSE

Do you like Peterson’s comparison of the church to a glacier? What does it mean to you to “keep awake” and “hold fast” this Advent? Does one of those two phrases speak to you more powerfully than the other? Why do you think that is?

PRAYER

Eternal God, teach me to keep awake and hold fast, that I may trust in your word and in the long, slow but sure, movement of your church.
Amen.

Weekend Reflections

FURTHER CONNECTION

The sounds of devastation and destruction, the cries of self-importance and arrogance, the weeping of despair and powerlessness still fill the world. Yet, standing silently, all along the horizon are the eternal realities with their age-old longing. The first gentle light of the glorious abundance to come is already shining above them. From out there, the first sounds are ringing out. . . . They do not yet form a song or melody—it is all still too far off and only the first announcement and intimation. Still, it is happening. This is today.

ALFRED DELP, SJ (1907–45), WRITTEN IN
PRISON IN BERLIN, DECEMBER 1944

MAKING THE CONNECTIONS

Choose one or two questions for reflection:

1. What connections have you noticed between this week's texts and other passages in Scripture?
2. What connections have you made between this week's texts and the world beyond Scripture?
3. Do either of this week's two commentary themes speak especially to your life or the life of the world around you right now?
4. What is God saying to your congregation in particular through this week's readings and commentaries?

MY CONNECTIONS

Sabbath Day

SCRIPTURE OF ASSURANCE

O God, do not be far from me;
O my God, make haste to help me! (Psalm 71:12)

WEEKLY EXAMEN

- Take a quiet moment, seek out God's presence, and pray for the guidance of the Spirit.
- Consider the past week; recall specific moments and feelings that stand out to you.
- Choose one moment or feeling for deeper examination, thanksgiving, or repentance.
- Let go, breathe deeply, and invite Christ's love to surround and fill you in preparation for the week ahead.
- End with the Lord's Prayer.