

Nurturing Faith Commentary, Year A, Volume 1  
Lectionary Resources for Preaching and Teaching: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany

Nurturing Faith Commentary, Year A, Volume 2  
Lectionary Resources for Preaching and Teaching: Lent, Easter, Pentecost

Nurturing Faith Commentary, Year A, Volume 3  
Lectionary Resources for Preaching and Teaching: Season after Pentecost, Proper 1–14

Nurturing Faith Commentary, Year A, Volume 4  
Lectionary Resources for Preaching and Teaching: Season after Pentecost, Proper 15–29

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Nurturing Faith Commentary, Year B, Volume 1  
Lectionary Resources for Preaching and Teaching: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany

Nurturing Faith Commentary, Year B, Volume 2  
Lectionary Resources for Preaching and Teaching: Lent, Easter, Pentecost

Nurturing Faith Commentary, Year B, Volume 3  
Lectionary Resources for Preaching and Teaching: Season after Pentecost, Proper 1–14

Nurturing Faith Commentary, Year B, Volume 4  
Lectionary Resources for Preaching and Teaching: Season after Pentecost, Proper 15–29

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Nurturing Faith Commentary, Year C, Volume 1  
Lectionary Resources for Preaching and Teaching: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany

Nurturing Faith Commentary, Year C, Volume 2  
Lectionary Resources for Preaching and Teaching: Lent, Easter, Pentecost

Nurturing Faith Commentary, Year C, Volume 3  
Lectionary Resources for Preaching and Teaching: Season after Pentecost, Proper 1–14

Nurturing Faith Commentary, Year C, Volume 4  
Lectionary Resources for Preaching and Teaching: Season after Pentecost, Proper 15–29

# *Nurturing Faith Commentary*

**Year C, Volume 1**

Lectionary Resources for Preaching and Teaching:  
Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany

TONY W. CARTLEDGE

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# Original Publisher's Preface

**M**ore than a decade in the making, *Nurturing Faith Commentary* is unique in its intent and content. Anyone seeking to teach, preach, and/or learn from a broad swath of carefully explored biblical texts will find this to be a reliable, helpful, and treasured resource.

Tony Cartledge brings the mind of a scholar, the heart of a pastor, and the writing skills of an experienced author to this extensive yet accessible multi-volume resource. Rooted in a trusted weekly Bible study, lessons are provided for every possible Sunday of the Christian Year.

Following scripture texts as found in the three-year cycle designated by the Revised Common Lectionary, these lessons are both scholarly and applicable.

The purpose of these Bible studies goes beyond gaining knowledge – although the insights are plentiful – to discovering the inspiration and fresh possibilities for living out biblical truth in one's daily experiences and spheres of influence.

The many years of excellent work in which Tony poured himself into writing thoughtful, weekly Bible studies now form the basis of these volumes. These lessons reflect his wisdom, interpretive skills, diligence, and humility that never prescribe how others are to think and believe.

“Nurturing Faith” is more than just the overall title of this multivolume resource. Learning is seen as the road to redemption and transformation by an individual encountering not just facts, but a living God.

Each week, Tony's lessons have impacted individuals and classes of all shapes and sizes in seeking to learn and apply biblical truths. Having these volumes easily at hand will provide access to a multitude of ideas, insights, and illustrations for those heeding the call to equip disciples to more faithfully follow in the ways of Jesus.

A unique mark of these lessons is the way readers and listeners are treated respectfully and intelligently regardless of their backgrounds. The lessons are never dumbed down to the point of ignoring known scholarly findings.

Yet the purpose is not to impress, but to communicate. Though a Bible scholar and teacher of note, Tony seeks to convey biblical insights effectively rather than using language exclusive to the scholarly community.

When it comes to sharing helpful insights from biblical scholarship with his readers, Tony – intentionally using double negatives for effect – has often said: “I'll never not tell you something I know if it's relevant.”

This honest and appreciated approach contrasts with a long history of Bible study curriculum providers that “hand-cuff” writers and therefore “mind-cuff” learners with narrow doctrinal and marketing parameters.

In contrast, *Nurturing Faith Commentary* has no such restrictions – allowing for the freedom of both writer and readers to question, pray, seek, disagree, or apply whatever arises from the exploration of these ancient texts.

The Nurturing Faith approach to Bible study does have a lens, however. It is based on the belief that Jesus is God's fullest revelation, the Living Word through whom all else is filtered in a search for truth.

These insightful and inspiring lessons are a gift – coming from the sharp mind and generous spirit of a minister-scholar who helps us dig more deeply into the rich soil of truth formed by the many layers of experiences, reflections, and stories compiled in what we know and value as the Bible. Dig in!

John D. Pierce  
Executive Editor/Publisher  
Good Faith Media

## Current Publisher's Preface

The lectionary framework of studying the Bible invites readers to a journey. It suggests to those seeking wisdom and guidance from scripture that understanding and transformation take time and can only be accomplished by small, incremental steps.

The invitation is both time-bound and timeless. The journey, as mapped out by the Revised Common Lectionary, lasts three years and covers vast terrains of the biblical witness. It follows the seasons of the Church Year, which follow the lives of God, God's people, and that of God's most complete self-revelation: Jesus. And, like all seasons, they always come back around.

But the journey isn't an easy one. It requires a guide, and the best guides are those who have walked the pathway and circled back to the landmarks season after season. They know where the rocky cliffs give way to straight paths. They have rested at the banks of its rivers and stared in astonishment at the running waters, and they have humbly followed their own guides.

If we are fortunate, a truly excellent guide will leave behind notes on what they have found and draw seasonable maps for fellow travelers. Thankfully, we are fortunate.

Have you ever been on a tour with a guide who knows more about the site than almost anyone else but talks about it with the wonder of one witnessing it for the first time? If you use the *Nurturing Faith Commentary* as a resource for your Christian journey, then you have.

Tony W. Cartledge has dedicated his life to understanding and allowing the words and stories of the Bible to transform. Yet he sees himself simply as a fellow traveler. You will find the markers he has left along the pathway both trustworthy and illuminating. You will want to return to them time and again, in season and out.

Craig Nash  
Senior Editor  
Good Faith Media

# Introduction

The 12 volumes of *Nurturing Faith Commentary* are the product of a committed desire to provide quality Bible study for Christians who come to the scripture with open minds and a desire to go beneath a surface reading. Our goal has been to provide pastors, teachers, and other Bible students with both academic and pastoral insights in approachable language.

The project began in early 2011, when John Pierce, editor of what is now *Nurturing Faith Journal*, envisioned the idea of including a weekly Bible study in the print version of the journal, along with additional resources provided online. The studies were to be based on texts from the Revised Common Lectionary and use the New Revised Standard Version as the primary text. Use of the lectionary had become increasingly common in worship among progressive Baptists, who had been our primary audience, but resources for Bible study were lacking.

With many years of experience as a pastor, academician, professor, writer, and editor, I was asked to take on the challenge of writing these studies. With some trepidation, I accepted, and the first studies appeared in the July 2011 issue of *Baptists Today*. The studies have continued

now for more than a decade, even as the newspaper-style *Baptists Today* morphed into the magazine format of *Nurturing Faith Journal and Bible Studies*.

For those who subscribe to the journal, additional resources are available online, including detailed insights through “Digging Deeper,” helps for troublesome issues through “The Hardest Question,” a weekly video in which I offer a summary of the lesson, plus additional teaching resources for youth and adults prepared by other writers. In this resource, Digging Deeper and The Hardest Question are incorporated into print.\*

As years of publication and lectionary cycles piled up, we thought it fruitful to update and compile these lessons in a convenient format for teachers, preachers, or others who rely on helpful Bible studies, especially when lectionary based. That, plus the addition of many new commentaries for texts not previously covered, is now coming to fruition in a 12-volume set of Bible studies, with four volumes for each of the three lectionary years.

The project is a massive undertaking, and we are grateful to all who have contributed time, energy, and finances to the project.

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\*All photos used in *Digging Deeper* and *The Hardest Question*, unless otherwise indicated, are by Tony Cartledge.



## Using This Resource

The Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), devised by a consortium of Protestant and Catholic representatives on the Consultation of Common Texts, was published in 1992. Since then, it has become a standard resource for both Roman Catholics and mainline Protestants.

The lectionary contains hundreds of texts chosen to reflect a progressive study of primary texts in the Bible, along with texts representative of the church year. It follows a three-year cycle known as “Year A,” “Year B,” and “Year C,” then repeats the cycle, using the same texts. Year A relies mainly on Matthew for the gospel readings, while Year B focuses on Mark, and Year C draws mainly from Luke. Selections from the gospel of John are scattered through the three years.

Most days on the lectionary calendar include four readings. These typically follow a pattern of one reading from the Old Testament narratives, prophets, or wisdom; one text from Psalms; one text from the New Testament gospels; and one text from the epistles. Exceptions are many, especially during the Season after Pentecost, when most Sundays include two additional readings as options.

The RCL includes texts for both Sunday worship and other special days. *Nurturing Faith Commentary* focuses on texts for Sundays rather than every “feast day” on the church calendar, many of which are not observed through active services, especially in Protestant churches. We do include texts chosen for New Year’s Day, Epiphany, and All Saints’ Day, however, because sometimes they fall on Sunday.

A small handful of optional texts from the Apocrypha or “Deuterocanonicals,” which are regarded as scripture by Roman Catholics, appear in the lectionary. Given that I write as a Protestant and our audience is mainly Protestant, apocryphal texts are not included in this resource.

The studies in these volumes are not dated, because we want them to be useful in any calendar year, and no year contains all the potential Sundays. Persons who use the text for preaching and teaching may easily consult

online and print resources for the specific dates associated with each lectionary Sunday. (Vanderbilt University’s library provides an ideal resource at <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu>.)

The RCL sometimes uses the same texts on multiple Sundays. When those occur, the study for that text will be printed only once per volume, with appropriate notes to indicate where it may be found if it is indicated on multiple Sundays.

Lectionary texts follow the church year rather than the calendar year, beginning with Advent, the four Sundays prior to Christmas day. Three optional sets of texts are provided for use on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. These are sometimes referred to as “Christmas 1, 2, and 3,” or as “Proper 1, 2, and 3” for Christmas. The first three potential Sundays after Trinity Sunday are also called “Proper 1, 2, and 3,” so in this resource we will use the terms “Christmas 1, 2, and 3.”

For the sake of completeness, we include studies for all three Christmas options in Volume 1. Many churches hold Christmas Eve services, and Christmas Day sometimes falls on Sunday.

One or two Sundays may follow Christmas, depending on the number of Sundays between Christmas Day and Epiphany. Texts for the second Sunday after Christmas are rarely used and always the same. Studies on those texts are also provided in Volume 1. The texts are sometimes similar to texts for New Year’s Day.

Epiphany is celebrated with special texts on January 6, which commonly occurs during the week, but studies on these texts are also included in this resource because Epiphany sometimes occurs on a Sunday. Ministers also sometimes choose to use texts for Epiphany on the Sunday nearest January 6.

The season of Epiphany may include from four to nine Sundays before concluding with Transfiguration Sunday. The number of weeks depends on the date of Easter, which moves about on the calendar, likewise affecting the dates of Ash Wednesday and the beginning

of Lent. The last few weeks of Epiphany aren't used in each cycle, but they are included for the sake of those years that do have them. Their location is in Volume 3 of each year, as will be explained below.

Lent always includes six Sundays, concluding with Palm Sunday, which can be celebrated with texts focusing on Jesus' entry to Jerusalem, or on the following passion. Both are provided.

The Season of Easter has seven Sundays leading up to the day of Pentecost, 50 days after Easter.

The first Sunday after Pentecost is always Trinity Sunday. Depending on the calendar, from 23 to 29 Sundays follow Pentecost, ending on the last Sunday before Advent. These are called "Proper" Sundays. The RCL handles the dilemma of differing calendars by starting at the end with Proper 29 as the Sunday before Advent, then working backward. In this system, the texts for Proper 7 through Proper 29 appear in each year's cycle. Texts for Proper Sundays 1–6 are not always used, but are provided for those calendar years in which they appear.

Since Epiphany 6–9 and Proper 1–4 are the least likely to occur, they share the same texts: Epiphany 6 = Proper 1, Epiphany 7 = Proper 2, Epiphany 8 = Proper 3, and Epiphany 9 = Proper 4. Studies for these Sundays are included in Volume 3 for each year, which begins the Season after Pentecost, with their location noted in Volume 1, which contains lessons for the Season of Epiphany.

The number of "Sundays after Pentecost" for a given "Proper" Sunday is different from year to year, so in this resource they will be designated by the "Proper" number, which can be coordinated with each year's number of "Sundays after Pentecost," which will vary.

Texts, especially from the psalms, are often short and designed more for liturgical reading than for individual study. Even so, all texts receive full treatment in Bible study form.

Readers familiar with the RCL know that texts are often chopped and spliced for liturgical reading, which isn't always ideal for a connected Bible study. In many of those cases, the Bible study in these volumes will expand the RCL selection to provide greater context and continuity. Texts listed in the Table of Contents, with each lesson/commentary, and in the index, are based on the actual text examined, which may be longer than the RCL text, but not shorter.

The basic outline of the series is as follows, for each of the three cycles:

Volume 1 – Advent through Epiphany

Volume 2 – Lent through Pentecost

Volume 3 – Season after Pentecost (Propers 1–14)

Volume 4 – Season after Pentecost (Propers 15–29)

# Abbreviations

BCE	Before the Common Era
cf.	confer
ch., chs.	chapter, chapters
cp.	compare
CE	Common Era
CEB	Common English Bible
CSB	Christian Standard Bible
e.g.	for example
ESV	English Standard Version
et al.	and others
etc.	and others
f., ff.	the following verse, verses
HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible
KJV	King James Version of the Bible
LXX	Septuagint
MSG	<i>The Message</i>
MT	Masoretic Text
NASB95	New American Standard Bible, 1995 edition
NASB20	New American Standard Bible, 2020 edition
NET	New English Translation of the Bible
NET2	New English Translation, 2nd edition
NIV11	New International Version, 2011 edition
NJPS	New Jewish Publication Society
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version of the Bible
NRSVue	New Revised Standard Version updated edition
RCL	Revised Common Lectionary
v., vv.	verse, verses

# First Sunday of Advent

## First Reading Jeremiah 33:14-16

### A New Hope

*In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. (Jer. 33:15)*

The church year does not begin January 1, but with Advent, when Christians celebrate the coming of something far more important than the impending new year. During Advent, we combine memory and symbol in anticipating the earthly arrival of Christ as life-changer, world-changer, even eternity-changer.

Today we begin the Advent season with a curious text from Jeremiah in which the prophet speaks of a “righteous Branch” that will arise and start something new.

Jeremiah’s “branch” calls to mind two of my favorite Christmas specials. The first is *Emmet Otter’s Jugband Christmas*, Jim Henson’s version of Russell Hoban’s book by the same name.

Emmet’s story is set in a river village called “Frogtown Hollow,” where he and his widowed mother barely scrape by because Emmet’s late father had invested their resources in worthless snake oil.

As the story begins, Emmet brings home a “Christmas Branch” rather than a whole tree, following the example of his Pa, who would say “Because I didn’t cut it down, that tree will still be alive in a hundred years!” The simple pine branch serves as a symbol of hope.

A homely twig of a Christmas tree also appears in the perennial favorite, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. While shopping for a Christmas tree, Charlie Brown picks out a scraggly specimen because he feels sorry for it. The other children give Charlie Brown much grief for choosing such a pitiful tree, but when they gather to decorate it, the little tree becomes something beautiful.

#### A righteous branch (v. 14)

Three different prophets, when they wanted to proclaim the hope of a coming Messiah, used the image of a branch or shoot from a tree. Sometime near the middle of the eighth century BCE, Isaiah of Jerusalem foresaw that Israel would be cut down like a tree. But Isaiah also predicted that “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots” (Isa. 11:1).

Some 150 years later, after Israel had fallen to the Assyrians and Judah was imperiled by the Babylonians, the prophet Jeremiah also saw past Israel’s fall to a day of hope when God would raise up “a righteous branch” from the house of David (Jer. 33:15).

Following the exile, Zechariah used the same metaphor to express hope that Zerubbabel, a descendant of David, was the chosen “Branch” who would rebuild the temple and the nation (Zech. 3:8, 6:12).

All three prophets used the image of Israel as a great tree, especially during the reigns of David and Solomon, that had been cut down. Yet, from a stump that appeared lifeless and forlorn, the prophets saw a new shoot springing up, a branch that would grow strong with new life and bring renewed hope to God’s people.

Jeremiah’s prophecy is portrayed as a direct word from God: “The days are surely coming, says the LORD. I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah” (v. 14). **[Tough sprouts]**

Jeremiah did not specify the precise promise he believed God had made. He may have had in mind other prophecies