

# Shaped by God's Word

As we follow the light of Christ into the world in the Season after the Epiphany, this week's scripture readings offer guidance about how to live in a way that pleases God. Some might hear the centrality of God's law in these passages and believe that the instructions lead to a smaller more constrained life. However, the readings serve a broader goal. They reveal how those who "hear" can live into the fullness of who God created us to be; sculpted by God's law.

## Focus scripture: Luke 4:14–21

In its structure, Luke 4:14–21 focuses our attention on the central message from the prophet Isaiah. The first two verses set the stage for Jesus' message by announcing that the power of the Spirit is upon Jesus, and everyone praised his teaching. The final verse creates a sense of completion when Jesus states that the "scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." This frames Jesus' reading of Isaiah 61:1–2a and 58:6, and Isaiah's claim that the Spirit is upon him. Isaiah claims to be anointed to bring to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the God's favour – which may refer to the long-awaited Jubilee year in which everyone is freed from their financial burdens and able to start again to build the reign of God. Those gathered were surely expecting Jesus to expound upon the scroll, but he did not. Instead, Jesus simply states that the scriptures are fulfilled in the hearing.

It is hard to hear Jesus' announcement as more than aspirational because we are many centuries past this proclamation, and we still see in the world around us the hardships forced on the poor and oppressed, and we still see those held captive by addiction, prejudice, custom, and violence. So many wrongs have not yet been made right, yet as people of hope and faith, we believe that Jesus fulfills this proclamation and still calls us to join this work of making God's justice and love visible. As people of faith, let us not hear Luke 4:14–21 as the not-yet-realized description of Jesus' mission, but as the work that God sets before all of us who call ourselves followers of Jesus.

**Nehemiah 8:1–3, 5–6, 8–10** offers a picture of how to locate God's word in the heart of a community.

Following the return of the Hebrew people from their time in Babylonian exile, the community's actions communicate that God's law is going to be at the heart of community life, to be lived and celebrated. The centrality of God's law in this reforming community calls us to ask how we have positioned God's law in our communities.

**Psalm 19** reminds us that the law is a gift from God that is as indisputably good as the gift of creation. God's word forms creation and the law. The world was shaped out of the chaos when God spoke over the deep. Similarly, God spoke, and the law, which ordered the everyday life of the Hebrew people, was given to Moses.

**1 Corinthians 12:12–31a** Paul acknowledges that it can be easy to place more or less value on a member of a community because of the gifts that member offers. In some ways, it is comforting to know that this was an issue in the early church because it is an issue in today's church. Church members can tell who has more or less say in decision-making and who is considered more or less Christian. Paul explains that God honours the weaker members so that there is no dissension and members care equally for one another. Paul concludes that the community should strive for the greater gifts and promises that he will show the community a more excellent way.

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Listeners who have heard God's law know what pleases God and know how to conform their words and deeds to match. But self-restraint only reflects one purpose of the law, not the fullness of life that God's law offers. The readings this week remind us that God's word and God's law are a gift that forms us as God's people, shapes our communities and unifies us; this joins our lives with the hopeful future of God. God's word offers fullness of life.



## Focus scripture

**Luke 4:14–21**

## Additional scriptures

**Nehemiah 8:1–3, 5–6,  
8–10**

**Psalm 19**

**1 Corinthians 12:12–31a**

**Founder of the firmaments, creator of the skies, and giver of the law, we praise you for the ordered world that you freely created. In love, you have offered to us the fruitfulness of creation, the guidance of the law, and the fullness of community. Help us treasure your gifts to us this day. Amen.**

If you have Internet access, visit [www.seasonsonline.ca](http://www.seasonsonline.ca) to access Spirit Sightings for connections between current events and the focus passage.



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## The Focus for Adults

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This Sunday we are reminded of the power of God's word, expressed in Isaiah, and how it worked to define Jesus' identity, to shape his ministry, and ours, to offer goodness, and to create unity even where there is difference.

For many churches, this time of year is a time for annual meetings. Among the reports of congregational activities there may be grumbling about what the church is or is not doing. Has this ever happened in the life of your church? Have you and other group members ever witnessed, or become part of, a disruption of the "business as usual" in such gatherings? What does it feel like when such a disruption occurs? Such encounters may arise out of a basic question: what is God calling us to do? This is a familiar question for churches, and one that plays into the decisions we often have to make. When it comes to a choice at

work or home, what is the right thing to do? And will good come of it?

This week's focus passage centres on Jesus' teaching of God's ways. Imagine Jesus addressing your congregation's annual meeting about God's reign of justice and peace. Would Jesus' words be heard as a call to have a new vision or as a disruption of business as usual? Pray for each group member by name, that all may be opened by God's Spirit to a fresh consideration of how your lives can proclaim and embody with boldness the good news and good ways of God.

**Note:** The focus passages for January 27 and February 3 narrate the same event of Jesus' teaching. Find a way to combine these sessions if your group will not be meeting next week as both are important to considering the whole story.

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## Prepare

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### Before the session

- Read and prayerfully reflect on this week's scriptures, Nehemiah 8:1–3, 5–6, 8–10; Psalm 19; Luke 4:14–21; 1 Corinthians 12:12–31a, and [biblical background](#) material (p. 55). Review also the article "[Synagogue Rituals](#)" (p. 97).
- To access connections between current events and the focus passage, visit [www.seasonsonline.ca](http://www.seasonsonline.ca) and click on *Spirit Sightings*. Bring information that might inform this week's session.
- Set a worship space with green fabric, an open Bible, and a candle.
- Bring Bibles, matches, and [basic supply kit](#) (p. 2).
- Bring, if possible, *Seasons Songbook* (Volume 8) and *Seasons Music CD* (Volume 8), CD or MP3 player; downloadable sheet music and MP3 recordings are available at [www.seasonsonline.ca](http://www.seasonsonline.ca).

### Gather

- Bring, if possible, song "You Are Holy/*Hamba Nathi*" (p. 42 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 8; #21 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 8).

### Engage

- Bring copies of resource sheet "[Be a Christ](#)" (p. 96).

### Respond

Choose one or two options. Prepare and bring the materials.

- Dig deeper:** copies of resource sheet "[Customs and Traditions](#)"
- Mission statements:** copy of mission statement of your congregation
- Reflection:** copies of resource sheet "[Holy Reading](#)"

### Bless

- Bring copies of resource sheet "[Holy Reading](#)."
- Bring, if possible, song "I Am Sent by God/*Enviado Soy de Dios*" (p. 20 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 8; #5 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 8).
- Bring copies of [biblical background](#) material for February 3 (p. 61).



# Shaped by God's Word

## Scripture

Luke 4:14–21

**FOCUS** To be inspired by Jesus' bold word about the ways of the Spirit.

## Gather

**Welcome** participants and introduce any newcomers or visitors.

### Opening ritual

**Gather** in the worship space and light the candle.

**Sing**, if possible, the song "You Are Holy/Hamba Nathi" (p. 42 in *Seasons Songbook*; #21 on *Seasons Music CD*).

**Pray** Form two groups to read **Psalm 19** as an opening prayer, alternating verses.

### Moving into the theme

Take a moment to think of a time when you believe you were shaped by God's word. :

- **How did you experience it as an individual? To what extent did you experience the reforming of your faith community?**

## Engage

### Setting the context

The gospel readings for the past two weeks have explored a story of Jesus' baptism as told in Luke and the story of a wedding celebration at Cana, as told in John, an event that signalled the beginning of Jesus' ministry. In this week's session we return to the gospel of Luke, to a story that took place after Jesus had been baptized (Luke 3:15–22) and had experienced a time of temptation in the wilderness (Luke 4:1–13). During his time in the wilderness, the question that was constantly put before him was: "Is God to be trusted?" Though tempted, Jesus remained faithful. Invite a volunteer to read **Luke 4:13–14**, noting how the beginning of Jesus' ministry is described.

### Exploring the texts

Read aloud **Luke 4:15–21**. After time in the wilderness, Jesus returns to Galilee. "Filled with the power of the Spirit," Jesus begins to teach in the synagogues and is praised by everyone. When he came to his hometown, Nazareth, he went to the synagogue to worship.

- **What is the significance of Jesus returning to his hometown for this early teaching?**
- **How does this description amplify the teaching that Jesus is about to share?**

Jesus proclaims that the words that have come to him are being fulfilled in the hearing of the people.

The words convey a powerful sense of God's word as a living thing.

- **What stories guide your living, individually and as a church? What do these stories say about who you are?**
- **Reflect on the various ways in which God's word is experienced in your faith community. How is it being fulfilled? How is it being celebrated?**

Jubilee called for the return of all lands to their original owners. It provided for the freedom of indentured servants. Everyone freed from their financial burdens and able to start again.

- **Keeping in mind that Jesus has returned to his home town, what seems bold about Jesus' teaching?**
- **How might jubilee be the "ultimate community reset" – socially, politically, and theologically?**
- **What does it mean to really have jubilee? Is it practical? How might we live Jubilee without literally observing the details?**

**Other readings** Form three groups and assign each group one of the other readings for this day: **Nehemiah 8:1–3, 5–6, 8–10; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12:12–31a**. Have each group read the passage and discuss these questions:

- **What is the "good news" in this passage, and what makes it good?**

■ **What does this passage teach about the ways of God?**

Gather the groups together and ask them to offer brief summaries of their conversations around these two questions.

**Making life connections**

Often, we hear God’s word as limiting, confining and, dare we admit, as an outdated description of how we should live in Christian community. This week’s scriptures remind us that God’s word is a

good gift; it unites, focuses, empowers, and challenges.

■ **How have this week’s texts empowered, challenged, or strengthened your sense of belonging?**

Distribute copies of the resource sheet “[Be a Christ](#)” (p. 96) and invite group members to read the article.

■ **How do our words and lives proclaim God’s dream of a changed landscape? How might the words of Isaiah, claimed by Jesus, help us to “be Christ” and harness our inner Christ power?**

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## Respond

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Choose one or more of the following options.

- **Dig deeper: Traditions** Jesus’ bold words about the good news and good ways of God grew from his foundations in Judaism. Distribute copies of the resource sheet “[Customs and Traditions](#)” and invite participants to use the discussion questions to guide discussion. Think together about the traditions that energized and formed Jesus’ life. Discuss what traditions in the church today help to form faith and energize mission in positive ways.
- **Mission statements** The church is called to be bold in mission, following the example of Jesus’ teaching and acts of ministry. If your church has a mission statement, compare it with **Luke 4:18–19**. If your church does not have a mission statement, invite group members to consider the ministry activities in which the church is actively engaged. How do these “fit” with Jesus’



teaching? Invite participants to share ideas of the “good news” that they would like to see proclaimed by their church.

- **Reflection** This week’s gospel reading calls attention to Jesus’ customs of worship. Wonder together about the inspiration Jesus might have drawn from spiritual practices within the Jewish tradition. Distribute copies of the resource sheet “[Holy Reading](#)” and note that the reflection on this page offers one of the many disciplines and practices which can help a person nurture spiritual formation. It uses a modified form of *lectio divina* or “holy reading,” an ancient practice that blends scripture, prayer, meditation, action, and reflection. Invite participants to engage in this reflection on several verses from this week’s passages. If time is limited encourage them to use this discipline to guide devotion time at home.

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## Bless

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**Gather** around the lit candle again. Distribute copies of the resource sheet “[Holy Reading](#),” if not already done and form two groups to read the litany at the bottom of the page. Note that the lines are adapted from Jesus’ quote from Isaiah and from the song “You Are Holy.”

**Sing, or listen to**, if possible, the song “I Am Sent by God/*Enviado Soy de Dios*” (p. 20 in *Seasons Songbook, Vol. 8*; #5 on *Seasons Music CD, Vol. 8*).

**Pray** the prayer on the [biblical background](#) page (p. 55).

**Distribute** the [biblical background](#) materials for February 3 (p. 61).

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## Reflect

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In what ways did group members engage the theme of mission and what the Body of Christ is called to do? How might you, and others, follow through on further conversations around mission and the call of the Spirit?



# Customs and Traditions

## Synagogues

It is believed synagogues originated at the time of the Babylonian exile (6th century BCE). They provided a means for exiles and others living away from Israel to meet and maintain customs of Jewish identity. Two central customs of those gatherings were the offering of prayers and the reading and interpretation of scripture.

The prayers came to be known as the *amida* ("standing") because they were offered by worshippers as they stood. As for the readings, by the time of Jesus, a lectionary tradition had developed in Palestine. Following this lectionary, the entire Pentateuch (first five books of the Bible) would be read over the course of three years. It is unclear whether a similar lectionary of readings from the Prophets was in place by the time of Jesus.

The Pentateuch was written on a single parchment scroll stored in a special location, called an "ark," in the synagogue. Custom held for the text to be read in Hebrew and then translated into Aramaic, the common language of the day. This was done while standing. When it came time for interpreting or teaching about the scripture, the speaker sat.

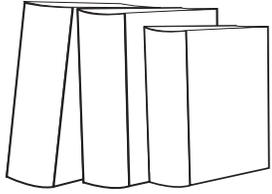
This custom of sitting to teach was reflected in the practices of the ancient Christian church. "Cathedral" comes from the Greek word for "chair." A cathedral was the church in which the bishop was "seated." The cathedral is where the bishop sat when invested with the office, and from where the bishop presided over Communion and preached. In modern times, *ex cathedra* has become a technical term for a teaching by the Roman Catholic pope, which carries extraordinary authority among Roman Catholics.

- **What are most important customs and traditions in your church's worship gatherings – the ones whose absence would cause a firestorm of controversy?**
- **In what ways, and by whose voices, is scripture read and interpreted in your worship?**

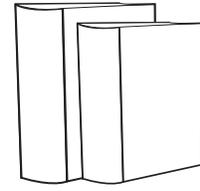
## Jubilee

The term *jubilee* derives from the Hebrew *yobel*, meaning "ram's horn." Leviticus 25 details the timing and ethical components of the observance of Jubilee. It is to take place every 50 years, near the end of the seventh year of seven seven-year cycles. Every seventh year was considered a "sabbatical" (from Sabbath) year, where the ground was to lie fallow. Jubilee, to be ushered in by the sounding of a ram's horn, thus came in the Sabbath year of seven Sabbath years. In place of the "rest" given to the land every seventh year, the Jubilee promised restoration. Land was to be returned to its original owners. Those had been enslaved because of debt were to be released. Provisions for providing food to those in need were made, since during the Jubilee year there would be no sowing or harvesting. Jesus' quote from Isaiah in Luke 4:19 refers to the "year of the Lord's favour," which is taken by many to be a reference to Jubilee.

- **In what programs and ministries is the spirit of Jubilee "kept" by your congregation?**
- **Where do you see the greatest need for rest and restoration in your community and the world?**
- **How might your church respond in new ways to the need for Jubilee?**



# Holy Reading



## Read Luke 4:18–19 and 1 Corinthians 12:12–13.

- Listen to these words in the context of the day ahead of (or behind) you.
- Write down your thoughts on those connections.
- Offer prayer that attends to the movement you hear in these passages and your life.

## Read Luke 4:18–19 and 1 Corinthians 12:12–13.

- Write one word and/or phrase from each text that speaks to you this day.
- Write down your thoughts around those words and their connections with your faith.
- Offer prayer that centres on those words: in praise, in confession, in request.

## Read Luke 4:18–19 and 1 Corinthians 12:12–13.

- Rewrite these passages as a prayer for your life and for the life of your congregation.
- Offer this prayer, and be in prayerful silence afterward – listening, trusting.

## Read Luke 4:18–19 and 1 Corinthians 12:12–13.

- Identify an individual or group for whom the fulfillment of these words would be good news.
- Prayerfully seek the Spirit's leading in discerning an action you can take on their behalf. Move forward with this action; do it as one anointed by God's Spirit.

## Read Luke 4:18–19 and 1 Corinthians 12:12–13.

- Reflect on the thoughts, prayers, and actions these words have evoked in you and others.
- Prayerfully rest in a spirit of gratitude for these words and for God's Spirit.

## Litany

**GROUP 1:** The Spirit of God is upon us, anointing us to bring good news to the poor.

**GROUP 2:** You are Spirit, anoint us today. Anoint us, anoint us, anoint us today.

**GROUP 1:** The Spirit of God is upon us, sending us to proclaimed release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind.

**GROUP 2:** You are Spirit, you send us today. You send us, you send us, you send us today.

**GROUP 1:** The Spirit of God is upon us, calling us to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the time of God's favour.

**GROUP 2:** You are Spirit, you call us today. You call us, you call us, you call us today.

**ALL:** You are Spirit, go with us we pray. Go with us, go with us, go with us we pray.

*(When used as an individual prayer, you may substitute "me" for "us.")*

# BE a CHRIST

By Robert V. Thompson

In our culture, Jesus is often presented as someone who can take us wherever we want to go. There is one proviso, however. We must buy the whole bundle of beliefs that make up the Jesus package. It's all or nothing. If we don't believe in a "virgin birth," then we can't possibly believe that Jesus was the Son of God. If we don't believe that his death on the cross saved believers from their sins, then we must think that Jesus was a mere human being and we just don't get it. If we don't interpret the Bible literally then we don't understand what the Bible is really saying, or accept it as the authoritative Word of God. Unless we swallow the complete Jesus package hook, line, and sinker, we are lost.

But what are the "right" things to believe and who has the authority to decide? Whom do we trust to decide what or who is on the list? How can one person claim to be any more inspired by the Holy Spirit than another? Who has it figured out enough to insist on being right?

Christ is the Christian word for the divine energy that connects everything. In Buddhism this power is called the *Buddha*. In Judaism some call it the *Shekinah*. In Hinduism it is called the *Atman*, in Sikhism it is known as *Naam*. Every religious and spiritual tradition understands this power in a unique way, and this only magnifies the mystery of it.

Christ power always manifests itself as love, compassion, non-violence, forgiveness, perfect understanding, and peace. And it would transform the world if each one of us would recognize that we all have the same mission in life; that is, to be Christ, or Buddha, or a rose by any other name.

Christ power is divine and holds everything in the universe together. Sometimes known as the cosmic or universal Christ, this Divine energy is what becomes incarnate in physical forms. It was

first revealed in a Mediterranean peasant named Jesus but it is not limited to Jesus.

Christ is not a particular identity but a universal power. This power came through but was not limited to Jesus. This Christ power is neither male nor female. It is a compassionate life-giving power that comes through each and every human being. Christ power breaks through whenever we feel closeness, connection, or unity with another living creature. This Christ energy is what gives us the capacity for compassion. Christ is the divine river that flows through us all.

Christ, like love, is a process. To relate to Christ as an external truth is to be ingested and consumed. Relating to Christ as an eternal truth or redeemer turns Christ into a product. Holding a belief is not the same as living the power of it.

Meister Eckhart spoke of the real way to know Christ when he wrote, "Do you want to know where to find Christ? Your soul is Christ." Eckhart suggests that the likeness of God is planted within the soul like a seed. It grows in us.

We are born with Christ in us. Our task, as Eckhart puts it is to be good, wise, and industrious farmers of this inner seed. If we are the least bit open, it grows. This Christ power doesn't come to us from outside. It happens through us, arising from within.

This Christ power is an inner whisper. It is the still, small voice that speaks to us in every encounter, every relationship, from every being. It is the teacher and doctor within. It is the power to understand without criticizing, to perceive without passing judgment, to comprehend without analyzing.

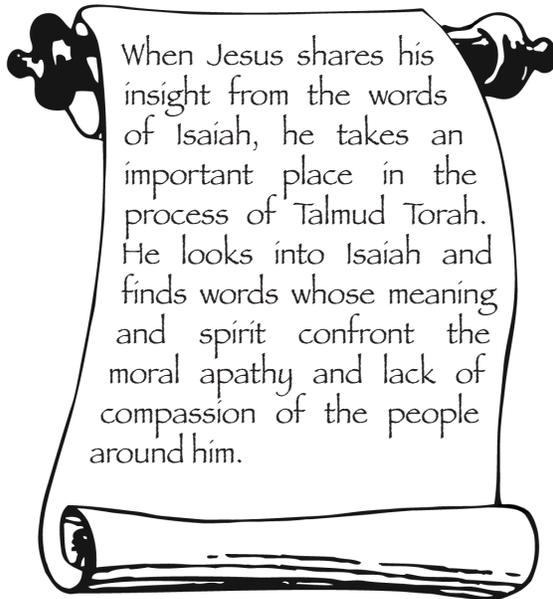
Just imagine how Christianity would be different if we lived beyond our belief systems and knew how to *be* Christ rather than a Christian.

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# Synagogue Rituals

By Rabbi Adam Morris



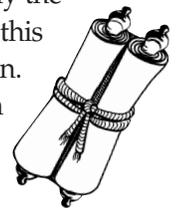
The image of Jesus reading and teaching from Scripture in a synagogue is one that encapsulates a seminal part of Jewish tradition. The act of a Jewish teacher or rabbi reading and interpreting our sacred stories in a synagogue with the community gathered for prayer may be the most important way that the Jewish community has thrived and survived through the centuries. It is from within the friendly confines created by familiar ritual objects and practices that a Jew encounters the dynamic and transforming nature of Talmud Torah – the study of Torah.

There are two significant parts to this scene: the form (the synagogue) and its content (the particular text and its interpretation). Synagogues – in particular the sanctuaries within – differ greatly from country to country and from century to century. The synagogues frequented by Jesus are different that the ones inhabited by Jews in the 21st century, but despite the differences, there are underlying similarities as the elements that make a synagogue a “synagogue” are simple and straightforward. Any place that ten Jews gather to pray makes that place an authentic sanctuary space. One will find a few common elements in such places that over

time became more established and consistent. The Torah scroll and the Aron Hakodesh (the cabinet that houses the scroll) are the two most significant elements. In addition, many synagogues will have a light called a Ner Tamid or Eternal Light that will be constantly lit to remind those present of God’s omnipresence.

While the setting and the rituals create a consistent and established form, it is Scripture and its interpretation that provides the energy and spirit that a Jew takes from her or his encounter with Jewish sacred stories. A Jew’s relationship with her or his sacred texts is a dynamic and even complex one. The process of Talmud Torah begins with an understanding that there exist various layers of scripture’s meaning. It is the role of the teacher, sage or rabbi to unlock the wisdom and truths woven into the layers of the text. That non-linear process can at times be challenging and illuminating, confrontational and inspiring. The text and interpretations are at their most potent when they serve as catalyst for introspection and change. A Jew comes to synagogue for the comfort and grounding nature of what is familiar and for the insight and spiritual demands inherent in the process of Talmud Torah.

When Jesus shares his insight from the words of Isaiah, he takes an important place in the process of Talmud Torah. He looks into Isaiah and finds words whose meaning and spirit confront the moral apathy and lack of compassion of the people around him. Sometimes, the encounter with Torah unsettles and forces those present to examine critically the nature of their lives. Like the people in this story, no one welcomes such examination. In the end, however, such examination is essential to our spiritual growth and in creating lives of meaning.



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