

December 23, 2018
Fourth Sunday of Advent
Luke 1:39-45

During those days Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said, "Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does this happen to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled."

Background:

The Gospel for this Sunday follows immediately after Luke's description of Mary accepting the invitation to be the mother of Jesus. Some have suggested that Mary went to visit Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John the Baptist, in order to help Elizabeth. But Luke reports that Mary left Elizabeth before John was born. "Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home. When the time arrived for Elizabeth to have her child, she gave birth to a son." (Luke 1:56-57) Therefore Mary would have left Elizabeth during that period when she would have needed the most assistance.

Luke does not indicate a precise location from which Mary left, nor the town to which she went. This would seem to indicate that it was both an insignificant place and not important for what he wants his community to know. But what Luke's community would notice is that Mary seems to be traveling alone. Women in this culture were always in the company of other women, children, and/or a male protector. For Mary, a fourteen-year-old girl, to travel alone would be enough to accuse her of being a shameful character. Yet the text calls Mary "blessed" three different times: twice in verse 42, for her unique role in God's plan, and lastly in verse 45 for her faith in God. On one hand, the details that Luke includes seem to cast Mary in a rather suspicious light, yet he strongly asserts that she is blessed.

One explanation is based in the people's understanding of procreation at the time. Men were believed to implant a full but miniature human being within a woman. The woman's role was to nurture the minute human being within her body until it was ready to be born and begin its independent life. With this understanding, the pregnant Mary was not traveling alone but with a male protector who is so powerful that even the unborn John the Baptist leaps within Elizabeth's womb when Mary enters their presence.

Reflection Questions:

1. What is your experience of women telling you that they are pregnant? What happens within you when you hear their news?
2. When you hear in today's gospel that Mary set out in haste to visit Elisabeth...
3. If you too had been visiting Elizabeth when Mary arrived at the house, you would have said to her...
4. Luke's portrait of Mary emphasized her faith and her willingness to do things that might cast her in a poor light before others. How does this view of Mary fit with your image of Mary?

5. When you think of people who you consider truly people of faith and trust in God, do you find that they do things that might be considered out of character or even scandalous?
6. Can you talk to God now about how he used Mary to bring Jesus into the world, or about your own desire to be an instrument of God's presence in your world, or about some other thought that this gospel raised within you?

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Excerpts from the readings for December 23, 2018, the Fourth Sunday of Advent

Thus says the Lord: You, Bethlehem-Ephrathah, too small to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel; whose origin is from of old, from ancient times.

Therefore the Lord will give them up, until the time when she who is to give birth has borne, and the rest of his kindred shall return to the children of Israel.

He shall stand firm and shepherd his flock by the strength of the Lord, in the majestic name of the Lord, his God; and they shall remain, for now his greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth; he shall be peace.

Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.

O shepherd of Israel, hearken, from your throne upon the cherubim, shine forth.

Rouse your power, and come to save us.

Once again, O Lord of hosts, look down from heaven, and see; take care of this vine, and protect what your right hand has planted, the son of man whom you yourself made strong. May your help be with the man of your right hand, with the son of man whom you made strong. Then we will no more withdraw from you; give us new life, and we will call upon your name.

Brothers and sisters: When Christ came into the world, he said: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; in holocausts and sin offerings you took no delight.

Then I said, 'As is written of me in the scroll, behold, I come to do your will, O God.'" First he says, "Sacrifices and offerings, holocausts and sin offerings, you neither desired nor delighted in." These are offered according to the law. Then he says, "Behold, I come to do your will." He takes away the first to establish the second. By this "will," we have been consecrated through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled." Excerpts from Micah 5:1-4A; Psalm 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19; Hebrews 10:5-10; and Luke 1:39-45

December 25, 2018

Gospels for the Nativity of the Lord (Christmas), and excerpts from Christmas mass readings

Matthew 1:1-25 Christmas, vigil mass

Luke 2:1-14 Christmas, mass during the night

Luke 2:15-20 Christmas Day, mass at dawn

John 1:1-18 Christmas Day, mass during the day

The church offers four options for the gospel for the observance of the Nativity of the Lord (Christmas Day), and suggests suitable times for their use—suggestions which you may find are not always followed exactly. All four texts are included here for your reflection and comparison. The full texts of each follow the short descriptions below. Since Mark's gospel does not include a nativity narrative, none of these four are from Mark.

Matthew 1:1-25, the gospel suggested for the vigil mass, starts with Matthew's long genealogy through 42 generations from Abraham to Jesus. Then it continues with the story of Joseph's choice to take Mary into his home, at the suggestion of the angel in his dream. The dream with the angel occurred after Mary, his betrothed, had been found to be with child, before they lived together, and after Joseph had decided to divorce her quietly. The short form of this gospel omits the long genealogy.

Luke 2:1-14, the gospel suggested for mass during the night, starts with the decree by Caesar for enrollment which led to the travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and it tells of Mary's baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, laid in a manger because there was no room at the inn. It continues with an angel proclaiming to shepherds that a savior is born, lying in a manger--and then a multitude of the heavenly host are praising God saying, "Glory to God in the highest."

Luke 2:15-20, the gospel suggested for mass at dawn, picks up where previous one left off. It describes the shepherds going in haste to Bethlehem, and finding Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger. The shepherds made known what had been told them, and Mary reflects on these things in her heart.

John 1:1-18, the gospel suggested for mass during the day, is the passage from the beginning of John's gospel that starts, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." It goes on to say "the light shines in the darkness," and "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us," and it ends with this: "No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father's side, has revealed him." Part of this gospel reading is familiar because it was included in the gospel for the third Sunday of Advent (just over a week ago).

Matthew 1:1-25 Christmas, vigil mass

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Abraham became the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers. Judah became the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar. Perez became the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, Ram the father of Amminadab. Amminadab became the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab. Boaz became the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth. Obed became the father of Jesse, Jesse the father of David the king.

David became the father of Solomon, whose mother had been the wife of Uriah. Solomon became the father of Rehoboam, Rehoboam the father of Abijah, Abijah the father of Asaph. Asaph became the father of Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, Joram the father of Uzziah. Uzziah became the father of Jotham, Jotham the father of Ahaz, Ahaz the father of Hezekiah. Hezekiah became the father of Manasseh, Manasseh the father of Amos, Amos the father of Josiah. Josiah became the father of Jechoniah and his brothers at the time of the Babylonian exile.

After the Babylonian exile, Jechoniah became the father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, Zerubbabel the father of Abiud. Abiud became the father of Eliakim, Eliakim the father of Azor, Azor the father of Zadok. Zadok became the father of Achim, Achim the father of Eliud, Eliud the father of Eleazar. Eleazar became the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Of her was born Jesus who is called the Christ.

Thus the total number of generations from Abraham to David is fourteen generations; from David to the Babylonian exile, fourteen generations; from the Babylonian exile to the Christ, fourteen generations.

Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. When his mother Mary was

betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly. Such was his intention when, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: *Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel*, which means “God is with us.” When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home. He had no relations with her until she bore a son, and he named him Jesus.

Luke 2:1-14 Christmas, mass during the night

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. So all went to be enrolled, each to his own town. And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. While they were there, the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear. The angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

Luke 2:15-20 Christmas Day, mass at dawn

When the angels went away from them to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go, then, to Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known the message that had been told them about this child. All who heard it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds. And Mary kept all these things, reflecting

on them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them.

John 1:1-18 Christmas Day, mass during the day

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be. What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. A man named John was sent from God. He came for testimony, to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came to be through him, but the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him.

But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in his name, who were born not by natural generation nor by human choice nor by a man's decision but of God. And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth. John testified to him and cried out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'The one who is coming after me ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.'" From his fullness we have all received, grace in place of grace, because while the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father's side, has revealed him.

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Excerpts from the readings for December 25, 2018, Nativity of the Lord (Christmas), Mass during Night

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone.
You have brought them abundant joy and great rejoicing,
as they rejoice before you as at the harvest, as people make merry when dividing spoils.

For the yoke that burdened them and the rod of their taskmaster you have smashed.
Every boot that tramped in battle, every cloak rolled in blood, will be burned as fuel for flames.

For a child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder dominion rests.
They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace.
His dominion is vast and forever peaceful, from David's throne, and over his kingdom,
which he confirms and sustains by judgment and justice, both now and forever.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this!

Today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord.

Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all you lands; bless his name.

Announce his salvation, day after day. Among all peoples, tell his wondrous deeds.

Let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice; let the sea and what fills it resound;

Let the plains be joyful, and all the trees of the forest exult before the Lord.

For he comes to rule the world with justice, and the peoples with his constancy.

Beloved: The grace of God has appeared, saving all and training us to reject godless ways, and to live justly and devoutly as we await the blessed hope, the appearance of the glory of our God and savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to deliver us from lawlessness and to cleanse for himself a people eager to do what is good.

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled.

So all went to be enrolled, each to his own town.

And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David,

to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

While they were there, the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to her firstborn son.

She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock.

The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear. The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

Today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord.

You will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."

And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying:

"Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

Excerpts above from Isaiah 9:1-6; Psalm 96: 1-3, 11-13; Timothy 2:11-14; and Luke 2:1-14

Excerpts from the readings for December 25, 2018, Nativity of the Lord (Christmas), Mass at Dawn

See, the Lord proclaims to the ends of the earth:
say to daughter Zion, your savior comes!
Here is his reward with him, his recompense before him.
They shall be called the holy people,
the redeemed of the Lord,
and you shall be called "Frequented,"
a city that is not forsaken.

*A light will shine on us this day: the Lord is born for us.
The Lord is king; let the earth rejoice;
let the many isles be glad.
The heavens proclaim his justice,
and all peoples see his glory.
Light dawns for the just;
and gladness, for the upright of heart.
Be glad in the Lord, you just,
and give thanks to his holy name.*

Beloved: When the kindness and generous love of God our savior appeared, not because of any righteous deeds we had done but because of his mercy, He saved us through the bath of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he richly poured out on us through Jesus Christ our savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life.

When the angels went away from them to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go, then, to Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known the message that had been told them about this child. All who heard it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds. And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them.

Excerpts from Isaiah 62:11-12; Psalm 97:1, 6, 11-12; Timothy 3:4-7; and Luke 2:15-20