

Weekend Readings & Reflections

December 18-19, 2021 – Fourth Sunday of Advent

Reflection: *On this last Sunday before Christmas, the Church's Liturgy reveals the true identity of our Redeemer: He is, as today's First Reading says, the "ruler . . . whose origin is from . . . ancient times." He will come from Bethlehem, where David was born of Jesse the Ephrathite and anointed king (see Ruth 4:11-17; 1 Samuel 16:1-13; 17:1; Matthew 2:6). God promised that an heir of David would reign on his throne forever (see 2 Samuel 7:12-13; Psalm 89; Psalm 132:11-12). Jesus is that heir, the One the prophets promised would restore the scattered tribes of Israel into a new kingdom (see Isaiah 9:5-6; Ezekiel 34:23-25, 30; 37:35). He is "the shepherd of Israel" sung of in today's Psalm. From His throne in heaven, He has "come to save us." Today's Epistle tells us that He is both the Son of David and the only "begotten" Son of God, come "in the flesh" (see also Psalm 2:7). He is also our "high priest," from the mold of the mysterious Melchizedek, "priest of God Most High," who blessed Abraham at the dawn of salvation history (see Psalm 110:4; Genesis 14:18-20). All this is recognized by John when he leaps for joy in his mother's womb. Elizabeth, too, is filled with joy and the Holy Spirit. She recognizes that in Mary "the mother of my Lord" has come to her. We hear in her words another echo of the Psalm quoted in today's Epistle (see Psalm 2:7). Elizabeth blesses Mary for her faith that God's Word would be fulfilled in her. Mary marks the fulfillment not only of the angel's promise to her, but of all God's promises down through history. Mary is the one they await in today's First Reading - "she who is to give birth." She will give birth this week, at Christmas. And the fruit of her womb should bring us joy - she is the mother of our Lord.*



OPENING PRAYER

Leader: Welcome to our study for the third Sunday of Advent, a time of preparation. let us pray from Psalm 96:

All: Let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice; let the sea and what fills it resound; let the plains be joyful and all that is in them. Then let the trees of the forest rejoice before the Lord who comes, who comes to govern the earth; to govern the world with justice and the peoples with faithfulness. Amen.

Leader: This last week before Christmas is often very busy and very stressful. We can tend to become short-tempered, worried, and even a bit overwhelmed. In today's Gospel we read about two women who had every reason to be worried and overwhelmed: Mary, who had just learned that her life was about to change completely, and Elizabeth, who was pregnant in her old age. Yet these two women greeted each other in love and mutual respect. What's one thing you could do this week to help you relieve some of your stress and be more fully present to your friends and family? In the video, Edward Sri talks about how Mary's response to her situation wasn't to bury herself in her own thoughts, but to go in haste to help her cousin, Elizabeth. He points out that in our own lives, it is sometimes difficult for us to put service first, but that is what we are called to do in order to follow the example of Mary. Why do you think Mary went to help Elizabeth? What are some ways you can be of service to your family this last week of Advent? Ponder these questions as we watch the video:

(Play the video on [FORMED.org](https://www.formed.org) - [Opening the Word – Fourth Sunday of Advent \(Year C\)](#))

FIRST READING ~ Micah 5:1-4a ~

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.

As Christmas arrives, special passages of scripture are used to guide our understanding of Christmas. This Sunday is the only time that the Prophet Micah is used for our Sunday Readings. A prophecy 700 years before Jesus points to the little town of Bethlehem, famous as it was the home of Jesse, King David's Father. It was from this royal line the Messiah would arrive. Ephrathah was a little and insignificant clan / tribe.

- *Consider for a moment just how extraordinary is God's power to guide history and prophecy to fulfillment. How might this help you trust in God?*



SECOND READING ~ Hebrews 10:5-10 ~

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.

The Letter to the Hebrews teaches about the significance of Jesus. Holocausts, sin offerings and sacrifices were experiences of Jewish worship in the Temple that were to bring people into union with God according to the law. Jesus is shown as following the will of God and bringing forgiveness and union with God through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all on the cross. Why Jesus has come among us is pointed out.

- *Do you keep Christmas separated from Easter? Have you noticed cards and decorations easily identify with the joy of a new-born child and the hope of peace but prefer to leave out the next step of the sacrifices involved in ‘I come to do your will, O God?’ What is the will of God inviting you to do?*

GOSPEL ~ Luke 1:39-45 ~

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."

This gospel scene of Mary visiting Elizabeth aims to show us more than the greeting of two expectant mothers or that Mary is a caring young woman to her older cousin. Behind this scene are layers of stories. Mary, a new mother (New Testament) stands before Elizabeth an old mother (Old Testament). Behind Elizabeth is her husband, Zechariah the High Priest of the (old) Temple. Within the Temple rests the Ark of the Covenant where the 10 Commandments were kept housed in a special box (Ark) called the Mercy Seat. Mary bears within her the Savior Child God-is-with-us and is now the New Ark of the New Covenant. The little boy John the Baptist leaps for joy within the womb of Elizabeth like King David leapt for joy and danced before the Ark of the Covenant (2 Sam 6,14). The deepest and true response to God being enfleshed among us is to leap for joy.

- *When was the last time you leapt for joy? Why is little baby John leaping for joy? How could you show the experience of joy more this Christmas?*

The gospel of Luke focusses upon Mary who always acts on what she hears. Her visit to Elizabeth is a response to hearing God's voice (through the angel). Mary is blessed but firstly it is because she believed what was spoken to her. Christmas becomes no longer simply a historical story for us when we recognize we too are called to allow the Word to become Flesh. Today. Now. In the world.

- *What words have you heard from God, in prayer, through others. How could you act on them so that they become flesh? Real? Acted out? Bring God's presence? What words or promises have you made that have not been fulfilled?*

Advent is a time of joyful preparation.

- *In the final days before Christmas how could you achieve a balance: writing Christmas cards and the call to conversion? Christmas parties and prayerful preparation? Christmas presents and Christmas Presence?*

Daily Quote from the Early Church Fathers: John prophecies from the womb, by Maximus of Turin (died between 408-423 AD)

"Not yet born, already John prophecies and, while still in the enclosure of his mother's womb, confesses the coming of Christ with movements of joy - since he could not do so with his voice. As Elizabeth says to holy Mary, 'As soon as you greeted me, the child in my womb exulted for joy.' John exults, then, before he is born. Before his eyes can see what the world looks like, he can recognize the Lord of the world with his spirit. In this regard, I think that the prophetic phrase is appropriate: 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you came forth from the womb I sanctified you' (Jeremiah 1:5). Thus we ought not to marvel that after Herod put him in prison, he continued to announce Christ to his disciples from his confinement, when even confined in the womb he preached the same Lord by his movements." (excerpt from *SERMON 5.4*)



MEDITATION

Do you recognize the indwelling presence of the Lord Jesus in your life? Blessed are you if you see and recognize the Lord with the "eyes of faith". The word "blessed" [*makarios* in Greek] literally means "happiness" or "beatitude". It describes a kind of joy which is serene and untouchable, self-contained, and independent from chance and changing circumstances of life.

There is a certain paradox for those "blessed" by the Lord. Mary was given the "blessedness" of being the mother of the Son of God. That blessedness also would become a sword which pierced her heart as her Son died upon the cross. Anselm, a great teacher and Archbishop of Canterbury (1033-1109), spoke these words in a homily: "Without God's Son nothing could exist; without Mary's son, nothing could be redeemed." To be chosen by God is an awesome privilege and responsibility. Mary received both a crown of joy and a cross of sorrow. Her joy was not diminished by her sorrow because it was fueled by her faith, hope, and trust in God and his promises. Jesus promised his disciples that "no one will take your joy from you" (John 16:22). The Lord gives us a supernatural joy which enables us to bear any sorrow or pain and which neither life nor death can take away. Do you know the joy of a life given over to God in faith and trust?

What is the significance of Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth before the birth of Jesus? When Elizabeth greeted Mary and recognized the Messiah in Mary's womb they were filled with the Holy Spirit and with a joyful anticipation of the fulfillment of God's promise to give a Savior. What a marvelous wonder for God to fill not only Elizabeth's heart with his Holy Spirit but the child in her womb as well. John the Baptist, even before the birth of the Messiah, pointed to his coming and leaped for joy in the womb of his mother as the Holy Spirit revealed to him the presence of the King to be born. The Holy Spirit is God's gift to us to enable us to know and experience the indwelling presence of God and the power of his kingdom. The Holy Spirit is the way in which God reigns within each of us.

- *Do you recognize the indwelling presence of the Lord Jesus in your life?*
- *Do you live in the joy and knowledge of God's indwelling presence with you through his Holy Spirit?*

CLOSING PRAYER

Leader: In closing, let us pray that we may prepare for Christ's coming during this final week of Advent and enjoy the time God has given us. Let us not lose focus on what is most important...

ALL: Lord Jesus, fill me with your Holy Spirit and give me joy in seeking You more earnestly. Increase my faith in all Your promises, my hope in the joy of heaven, and my love for You as my All. Amen.

Leader: (if time, let us offer up our intercessions ... St. Michael... Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory Be...)

[Opening reflection was shared from St. Paul Center at <https://stpaulcenter.com/studies-tools/sunday-bible-reflections>]

[video can be found at FORMED.ORG "Opening the Word". Additional reflections can be found at FORMED in "Opening the Word"]

[Discussion questions created by Fr Frank Bird sm, Marist Priest, and distributed by www.maristlitynz.org, were shared with permission from www.livingtheword.org.nz.]

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