

**ECHOING GOD’S WORD
IN THE
CATHOLIC FAITH COMMUNITY**

**Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 22, 2024**

SCRIPTURES:

Micah 5:14	A new “King David” will come from Bethlehem.
Hebrews 10:5-10	Christ came as one of us to make us one with God.
Luke 1:39-45	Mary hears God’s will for her and accepts it.
Psalms 80:2-3,15-16,18-19	Shepherd of Israel, come to shepherd your people.

READ THE SCRIPTURES:

Read the three Scripture passages given in the Lectionary for this weekend. Begin with the Gospel, since the other readings are always chosen in terms of the Gospel reading. (The second reading does not always have the same theme as the Gospel and the first reading. The first reading will be directly related to the Gospel in its content.) Repeat the Gospel reading. Remember that the word of God in the Bible is primarily addressed to the faith community and does not necessarily answer any questions which an individual may have. We simply ask, “What message does the Church (or this faith-sharing group or this family) need to hear? We listen to the word with that question in mind.

SCRIPTURE BACKGROUND:

Luke:

The salvation of the world, the destiny of all human beings, begins to be revealed in that wonderful story of faith and friendship, of comfort and caring, of family and of service, between these two women: Mary and Elizabeth. This is how God begins to unfold the human dimension of his love for us: that two women share love for one another. In that marvelous encounter between Mary and Elizabeth, God begins to play out the story of his tender love for each one of us.

In Luke-Acts, the least likely are the very ones who become participants and agents of God’s mercy and redemption: women, sinners, tax collectors, Samaritans, foreigners, disabled, sick, and possessed. The Father of the Lord Jesus Christ does not hesitate to involve these humble and marginal people in the great events of salvation.

“Who am I that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” God comes to those who have been chosen, carried in the womb of a humble Jewish girl. God comes to the humble and the destitute, the “little people” of the world; not to those whom the worldly powers would have chosen. The presence and the power of God are at work through the agency of the poor and the powerless. The Ark of the Covenant was covered with gold; now the presence of God is covered with the humble heart of an unmarried, pregnant juvenile. The new Covenant will be at work in the lives of people like Mary and Elizabeth, anyone who is open to God’s love.

Who are we that God should come to us with love and with redemption? Who are we that we should become ministers of salvation to those who share our poverty and our simplicity?

What is this time and season that brings us the presence of the Son of God as we serve one another's needs? What is this day that we long for when the Son of God will be given to us in the gift of ourselves to one another? The Advent of the Lord creeps upon us as we watch in hopeful expectation.

Micah:

This little-known but powerful prophet lived in the same era as Isaiah, before the fall of the Southern Kingdom (8th Century BCE). His work is addressed to the leaders of the people who have neglected their duty to call the people to repentance, preferring their own ease and comfort. To speak God's word to the people would require that they hear it first in their own lives. The prophet calls God's wrath upon those who will not obey God. The passage we hear today, perhaps added by a later prophetic hand, promises a new leader: one like David the shepherd king, one who is faithful to the Lord. Christians have been fond of seeing the Lord Jesus as that Shepherd King, descendant of David, born in the city of David: Bethlehem (the word means House of Bread!).

Hebrews:

Our salvation was obtained by the sacrifice of Christ in the death suffered in that same human body that he shares with us. The human body of Christ connects him to us and us to him. When he offered his body to sacrifice on the cross, he offered it for all human beings who are connected to him in their own human bodies. God shows special concern for us in sending the Son to share in our very humanity so that through that humanity, the human race might be saved.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Imagine the Christian community for whom Luke was writing. What would be some of their astonishment as they heard this story told? Why would they have been astonished? Describe how they, too, were an unlikely crew to be called to community and to salvation. (They were Gentile Christians.)

2. Why do you suppose Luke chose to tell the story of Jesus' coming from the point of view of two women rather than from Joseph's point of view as in Matthew?

3. Do you suppose Luke was consciously linking the story of the unborn John the Baptist leaping in his mother's womb with the story of David dancing before the presence of God in 2 Samuel 6:14-15? Did you ever feel your heart leap within you when you experienced a deep and sudden joy?

4. What is the good news that the Church needs to hear today as these Scriptures are proclaimed throughout the world?

PRAYER

Lord God, I pray that I may be able to see
that you most often are present and working
in some rather unlikely persons around me:
persons I might not have chosen
if you had not first chosen them for me.

Lord, I want to be able to see you in
the poor, the lame, the blind and the outcasts.
I want to see you in those who count for nothing in this world,
those who go unnoticed in everyday life:
women who struggle to earn a living for themselves and their children,
welfare-dependent families, those in prison.
Grant that I may see you always in them!

CATHOLIC DOCTRINE

“Who am I that the mother of the Lord should come to me?” Already the community of Luke was able to assert, through the mouth of Elizabeth, that Jesus was the Lord: as yet unborn but still Lord and Savior. The Church rejoices in calling Mary, the Mother of God. The doctrine was proclaimed at the Council of Ephesus (431 CE) in response to the threat of the Nestorians who so emphasized the distinction between the human and the divine in Jesus that some even said that Mary was only the mother of Jesus’ humanity and not of the wholeness of him, human and divine. By asserting the doctrine of the Theotokos, the Mother of God, the Church wanted to safeguard its teaching and its beliefs that Jesus was but one person in two natures: God and man.

These doctrines developed first in the East. The Western Church -- Rome, Milan, the Churches of Gaul and Iberia -- seem to have had other preoccupations at the beginning of doctrinal development. But the Eastern Churches struggled to clarify their exposition of the faith concerning Christ in his relationship to the Father and in his own being and nature and personhood. How could they be accurate in speaking of Jesus who was obviously born of a human mother, yet still was identified with the Father in the very substance of his being?

Having previously settled the question of identity with the Father at the Council of Nicaea (325 CE), the Eastern Church finally had to deal with those who would too radically separate the human and the divine in Jesus. Wanting to assert that there could only be one person in Christ, the Council of Ephesus chose a shorthand way of expressing it: Mary was the Mother of God! If Jesus was truly God in his personhood, then it was proper to speak of Mary as mother, not just of the human dimension but of the whole person; that person being divine.

Today, some Catholics sort of cringe or swallow hard when they hear the expression “Mary, Mother of God and our Mother” in eucharistic prayers. They are afraid of being misunderstood by those Christians who do not honor Mary in any special way. Perhaps, they will think we are saying that Mary is the Mother of God the Father! Some think it best to avoid the expression altogether! Clearly, the Church wants us to proclaim that Jesus is God; so, we must say: “Mary, Mother of God!”

See: *Catechism* # 668-677

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