

FIRST READING – C ADVENT 4

A reading from the book of the prophet Micah.

pronounced: MY-KA

Pause - and look up at the assembly

The Lord says this to his people,
“You, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.”
Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labour has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred
shall return to the children of Israel.
And he shall stand and feed his flock
in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they shall live secure,
for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth;
and he shall be peace.

pronounced: EFF-A-THUH



PAUSE for **THREE** seconds
then look up at the people
and say SLOWLY:

The WORD of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

SECOND READING – C ADVENT 4

A reading from the letter to the Hebrews.

Pause – and look up at the assembly

Brothers and sisters:

When Christ came into the world, he said,
“Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,
but a body you have prepared for me;
in burnt offerings and sin offerings
you have taken no pleasure.

Then I said,
as it is written of me in the scroll of the book,
‘See, God, I have come to do your will, O God.’”

When Christ said,
“You have neither desired nor taken pleasure
in sacrifices and offerings
and burnt offerings and sin offerings”
(these are offered according to the law,)
then he added,

“See, I have come to do your will.”
He abolishes the first in order to establish the second.
And it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified
through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ
once for all.



Pause for **THREE** seconds
then look up at the people
and say SLOWLY:

The WORD of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL READING – C ADVENT 4

The Lord be with you.

And with your spirit.

A reading from the holy gospel according to Luke.

Glory to you, O Lord.

Mary set out and went with haste
to a Judean town in the hill country,
where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.
When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting,
the child leaped in her womb.
And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit
and exclaimed with a loud cry,
"Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb.
And why has this happened to me,
that the mother of my Lord comes to me?
For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting,
the child in my womb leaped for joy.
And blessed is she who believed
that there would be a fulfilment
of what was spoken to her by the Lord."



The GOSPEL of the LORD.

Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

SCRIPTURES IN DEPTH

Reading I: Micah 5:1-4a

As with Zephaniah last week, this is the only use of Micah in the Sunday Lectionary, so we will again provide some introductory information. Micah prophesied in the southern kingdom of Judah at the end of the eighth century, during the reigns of Ahaz and Hezekiah.

Although he lived through a series of intense international crises, including the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel and the invasion of Judah by the Assyrians, Micah took little note of these events (contrast Isaiah of Jerusalem) but concentrated rather on the denunciation of Judah for its social injustices (cf. Amos).

Micah's work, like Zephaniah's, was later edited, and more positive promises were added. The oracle about the birth of the messianic king at Ephrathah ("Bethlehem" is thought to be an explanatory gloss) is probably one such addition.

The situation when Micah wrote seems to be that which prevailed at the end of the Exile, when hopes ran high for the restoration of the Davidic monarchy. Christian faith has, since Matt 2:6, seen the final fulfillment of this oracle in the birth of Jesus.

Responsorial Psalm: 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19

This same arrangement of Psalm 80 was used on the first Sunday of Advent in series B. Note particularly the last two lines of the first stanza: "Stir up thy might, and come to save us!" It is hard to imagine a more appropriate Advent prayer. Its words are echoed in the ancient Advent collects that begin with "Excita."

The third stanza is a prayer for God's blessing on the Davidic king. Coupled with the first reading, this may be appropriately referred to Jesus Christ. Thus, we put ourselves in the position of ancient Israel waiting for the coming of the Messiah as we wait for the celebration of his coming at Christmas.

Reading II: Hebrews 10:5-10

This reading (beginning at verse 4) is also used on the feast of the Annunciation (March 25), a day with which this Sunday has much in common. It is one of the most important passages in Hebrews, for it defines Christ's sacrifice as the offering of his body (that is, the instrument of his will) in obedience to his Father.

This, says the author of Hebrews, building upon Psalm 40, is the whole *raison d'être* of the incarnation. Christ took a body so as to have an instrument by which to offer this perfect obedience to the will of God.

The choice of this reading today is a salutary reminder, needed particularly at this time of year, not to dissociate the incarnation from its supreme goal, the atonement. Bethlehem was the prelude to Golgotha.

Gospel: Luke 1:39-45

Since there are only two annunciation stories in the Gospels (see the fourth Sunday of Advent in series A and B), series C switches to the visitation. Today's reading in the Episcopal Lectionary runs through verse 49, thus including the first four verses of the Magnificat, which has traditional associations with the fourth Sunday of Advent.

Three times in this pericope Mary is pronounced "blessed" (see also the second verse of the Magnificat; this is the scriptural ground for our calling her the "Blessed Virgin").

Two closely connected reasons are given for Elizabeth's calling her "blessed": Mary's faith (v. 45), which is the same as her obedience (Luke 1:38, the alleluia versicle), and her bearing of the Christ child (v. 42).

So Mary is blessed, not for what she was or is in herself, but only in relation to the incarnation. The Mariology of Scripture is grounded in Christology.

In order to follow the evangelist's understanding of the annunciation, the conception of the Christ child, and the dialogue between Mary and Elizabeth at the visitation, we should avoid prematurely harmonizing Luke's presentation with the Johannine prologue.

Luke does not operate with a preexistent Logos-Christology as the fourth evangelist does, any more than the fourth evangelist operates with a conception and birth narrative.

For Luke, the virginal conception is not the way in which the preexistent divine Son assumes humanity, for he does not think in those terms; rather, the miraculous conception is the supreme example of those Old Testament conceptions in which God raises up a person to perform a specific function in salvation history (Isaac, Moses [7], Samson, Samuel).

Thus, Mary's miraculous conception of Jesus marks the birth of one who is to perform the eschatologically unique role in salvation history (Luke 1:32-33; note the future tenses, which speak of this child's future role, not of his "divine nature").

In Luke—and the same is doubtless true of Matthew—the infancy narrative is strictly *Vorgeschichte*, a historical prelude to a unique salvation history that begins with the baptism of Jesus and continues through his exaltation (see the qualifications for apostolic witness in Acts 1:22).

We shall discuss how this exegetical interpretation of Luke is to be squared with the Church's later ontological interpretation of the incarnation and shall propose a contemporary interpretation of it in our comments on the Johannine prologue at the third Mass of Christmas.

Reginald H. Fuller