

## FIRST READING – A MARY, MOTHER OF GOD

A reading from the book of Numbers.

Pause – and look up at the assembly

The Lord spoke to Moses:  
Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying,  
Thus you shall bless the children of Israel:  
You shall say to them:  
The Lord bless you and keep you;  
the Lord make his face to shine upon you,  
and be gracious to you;  
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you,  
and give you peace.  
So they shall put my name on the children of Israel,  
and I will bless them.

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



The WORD of the LORD.

*Thanks be to God.*

## SECOND READING – A MARY, MOTHER OF GOD

A reading from the letter of Saint Paul to the Galatians.

Pause – and look up at the assembly

Brothers and sisters:  
When the fullness of time had come,  
God sent his Son, born of a woman,  
born under the law,  
in order to redeem those who were under the law,  
so that we might receive adoption to sonship.  
And because you are sons and daughters,  
God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying,  
“Abba! Father!”  
So you are no longer a slave but son,  
and if son then also an heir, through God.



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

The WORD of the LORD.

*Thanks be to God.*

## **GOSPEL READING – A MARY, MOTHER OF GOD**

The Lord be with you.

*And with your spirit.*

A reading from the holy gospel according to Luke.

*Glory to you, O Lord.*

The shepherds went with hast to Bethlehem  
and found Mary and Joseph,  
and the child lying in the manger.  
When they saw this,  
they made known what had been told them about this child;  
and all who heard it were amazed  
at what the shepherds told them.  
But Mary treasured all these words  
and pondered them in her heart.  
The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God  
for all they had heard and seen,  
as it had been told them.

After eight days had passed,  
it was time to circumcise the child;  
and he was called Jesus,  
the name given by the Angel  
before he was conceived in the womb.



The **GOSPEL** of the **LORD**.

*Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.*

## SCRIPTURES IN DEPTH

The title of this feast is apparently suggested by two sentences from the day's readings. One is from the second reading: "God sent forth his Son, born of woman." The other is from the gospel: "Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart." Only the former sentence has relevance to the *Theotokos*, for it speaks of Mary's *giving birth* to the Son of God. The latter sentence treats Mary rather as the paradigm of faith, and therefore of the Christian believer and the true Israel.

The calendar of the Episcopal Church uses the same gospel, which is traditional for this day, but has a different title for the feast: The Holy Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ. This takes its cue from the last verse of the gospel, as did the old title, the Circumcision. Whatever the precise title of the day, its major concern is still the birth of Christ as the beginning of the saving act of God.

### **Reading I: Numbers 6:22-27**

This reading comprises the Aaronic blessing, which, like the *tersanctus* of Isa 6 with its threefold form, is a remarkable anticipation of the Trinitarian faith of the Church. Special attention is directed, in the caption to the reading, to the last verse: "So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them," which suggests an emphasis on the holy name.

People often ask glibly, "What's in a name?" In biblical thought the answer is "Everything!" The name stands for the whole person, his/her character and power of personality. The name of God is the Being of God himself, all that he has manifested himself to be in his revelation in salvation history, culminating in the Christ-event.

To "bless" means to invoke upon the faithful all that God is and all that he has done for his people. The name of Jesus is the name of the triune God made manifest and present in saving power. This is surely an appropriate blessing for the new civil year.

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### **Responsorial Psalm: 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8\***

This psalm is also used on the sixth Sunday of Easter in series C. As the response shows, the emphasis is on prayer for God's blessing, which fits in perfectly with the first reading.

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### **Reading II: Galatians 4:4-7**

This is the traditional lesson for the first Sunday after Christmas, where it has been retained in the Episcopal Lectionary. According to recent scholarly investigation, this passage is a pre-Pauline creedal formula that Paul has expanded. The words "born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law" suggests the particular preoccupations of the Apostle, and therefore were probably insertions by him. This leaves us with the formula:

God sent forth his Son  
(born of woman)  
that we might receive adoption as sons.

One can see from this that the purpose clause follows immediately upon the sending clause: the Son was sent that we might become sons and daughters. This purpose clause is very important, for it indi-

cates that the nativity is not just a beautiful story devoid of connection with our own existence.

People today ask, “What has the birth of Christ got to do with me?”

The answer is that on it depends my whole status before God as his adopted child. He became human through a human birth precisely in order that we might be elevated to the status of children of God.

For further comment on this profound theological theme, see the second reading of the Mass at Dawn on Christmas.

But we cannot dismiss Paul’s addition about the law as having no relevance. It points toward the event mentioned at the end of the gospel—Jesus’ circumcision. In this he is shown to be “born under the law.”

In his incarnation and earthly life, he places himself under human limitations and enters into human culture, including all the restrictions of human freedom that characterize human life.

For Paul, the law was precisely such a restriction. It told people what to do but left them powerless to do it.

Only by complete submission to human bondage could the Son of God liberate people from it, for only he remained truly free, and only he is therefore able, in Van Buren’s suggestive metaphor, to pass on the contagion of that freedom to others.

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### **Gospel: Luke 2:16-21**

This gospel is almost identical with that of the second Mass of Christmas. The only differences are that it starts at verse 16 instead of verse 15, and that it goes on to include verse 21, the circumcision and naming of Jesus. This is clearly meant to be the climactic verse of today’s reading.

This reading completes the narrative begun in the gospel for the Midnight Mass—the pilgrimage of the shepherds to Bethlehem and their visit to Mary, Joseph, and the babe in the manger.

The angelic message had told them that the things they would see would be a “sign” (Lk 2:12). What they see has a meaning beyond what is visible to the eye, which can only see a baby, its mother, and her husband—a common enough sight. But this sight is a “thing that has taken place.”

The word translated “thing” can also mean “word,” that is, a significant, meaningful communication. So the sight of the child is a sign communicating to the shepherds the significance of what the angelic message had proclaimed: God’s salvation has come to earth.

The shepherds do not see the salvation itself but only its outward sign—the birth of the child, wrapped in swaddling clothes.

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