

Sunday, December 22, 2024 – Fourth Sunday of Advent

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Introduction

Cradle and cross are inextricably connected on the fourth Sunday of Advent. Between a lovely tribute to the little town of Bethlehem and Mary's magnificent song of praise, the letter to the Hebrews reminds us in no uncertain terms that Christ's advent is for "the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." It is the kind of tension in which the church always lives as when in holy communion—with high delight—"we proclaim the Lord's death."

Prayer of the Day

Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come. With your abundant grace and might, free us from the sin that binds us, that we may receive you in joy and serve you always, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

First Reading: Micah 5:2-5a

²But 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.

³Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.

⁴And 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;
^{5a}and he shall be the one of peace.

Psalm: 80:1-7

¹Hear, O Shepherd of Israel, leading Joseph like a flock;
shine forth, you that are enthroned upon the cherubim.

²**In the presence of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh,
stir up your strength and come to help us.**

³Restore us, O God;
let your face shine upon us, and we shall be saved.

⁴**O LORD God of hosts,
how long will your anger fume when your people pray?**
⁵You have fed them with the bread of tears;
you have given them bowls of tears to drink.
⁶**You have made us the derision of our neighbors,
and our enemies laugh us to scorn.**
⁷Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine upon us, and we shall be saved.

Second Reading: Hebrews 10:5-10

⁵Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said,
“Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,
but a body you have prepared for me;
⁶in burnt offerings and sin offerings
you have taken no pleasure.
⁷Then I said, ‘See, God, I have come to do your will, O God’
(in the scroll of the book it is written of me).”
⁸When he said above, “You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings
and burnt offerings and sin offerings” (these are offered according to the law), ⁹then he added,
“See, I have come to do your will.” He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. ¹⁰And
it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ
once for all.

Gospel: Luke 1:39-45 [46-55]

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where
she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary’s
greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and
exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your
womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as
soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed
is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” [
⁴⁶And Mary said,
“My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Prayers and introductions from
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Prayers of Intercession

In this season of watching and waiting, let us pray for all people and places that yearn for God's presence.

A brief silence.

Nurturing God, you give us life and care for our every need. Use the church's gifts and ministries for your service, bringing your word to all who seek your transforming grace. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Creator God, you proclaim your boundless love for all that you have made. Renew barren lands, polluted waters, and melting ice caps. Make us servants of your creation that brings forth abundant life. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Righteous God, you bring down the mighty and lift up the lowly. Strengthen those who seek justice. Bless the work of community organizers, activists, journalists, and all who call our attention to imbalances of power. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Compassionate God, you proclaim your love and mercy. Show your lovingkindness to teen parents and those who are pregnant. Comfort any struggling with infertility and those who await test results, are in treatment and hospice care, and others in need. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Gracious God, you fill the hungry with good things. Bless the feeding ministries of this congregation and community. Guide us to share your bounty with those who hunger or live in poverty. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Faithful God, you stir up the hearts of those who love you. We give you thanks for those who, like Mary, were courageous in their witness. Give us such courage until that day when you fulfill all things. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

God of new life, you come among us in the places we least expect. Receive these prayers and those of our hearts, in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

A reflection for this fourth Sunday of Advent

Being Recognized, Encountering Christ

Often called the visitation, the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth is full of joy, recognition, gratitude, and blessing. Luke immediately follows the annunciation with Mary's journey to visit Elizabeth, who gives this unmarried pregnant girl not only a safe haven but also the first glimpse of what it means to be the mother of the Savior. The encounter is full of mystery and grace: the mystery of new life forming but still invisible, and the grace of recognizing each other as the Spirit-filled mothers they are becoming.

The story is also full of theological gravity: as the women encounter each other, so do Jesus and John the Baptist. Yet the theological meaning is almost overshadowed by the sheer physicality of the encounter. Imagine the hasty travel, demonstrative greeting, joyful exclamation, the unborn John leaping for joy, and robust singing. As the celebration of Christ's birth approaches, the four active and responsive bodies in this text remind us that this is, after all, the incarnation itself unfolding.

God becomes a body in Jesus, and that body will be offered up for the sake of the world. This body, recognized already by John in the womb, will eventually undergo the suffering and shame of death on a cross. Without losing sight of that big picture, today we enter into the up-close picture of Mary and Elizabeth's encounter and share in the joy and gratitude they have in common with all who recognize Christ in their neighbor.



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