

## SPIRITUALITY

### GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Luke 1:38

**R.** Alleluia, alleluia.

Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.

May it be done to me according to your word.

**R.** Alleluia, alleluia.

### Gospel Luke 1:26-38; L11B

The angel Gabriel was sent from God  
to a town of Galilee called Nazareth,  
to a virgin betrothed to a man named  
Joseph,

of the house of David,  
and the virgin's name was Mary.

And coming to her, he said,

"Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you."

But she was greatly troubled at what was  
said

and pondered what sort of greeting this  
might be.

Then the angel said to her,

"Do not be afraid, Mary,

for you have found favor with God.

"Behold, you will conceive in your womb  
and bear a son,  
and you shall name him Jesus.

He will be great and will be called Son of  
the Most High,

and the Lord God will give him the throne  
of David his father,

and he will rule over the house of Jacob  
forever,

and of his kingdom there will be no end."

But Mary said to the angel,

"How can this be,

since I have no relations with a man?"

And the angel said to her in reply,

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you,  
and the power of the Most High will  
overshadow you.

Therefore the child to be born

will be called holy, the Son of God.

And behold, Elizabeth, your relative,

has also conceived a son in her old age,  
and this is the sixth month for her who  
was called barren;

for nothing will be impossible for God."

Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of  
the Lord.

May it be done to me according to your word."

Then the angel departed from her.

### Reflecting on the Gospel

The heavens have been torn open; God has come down, not with mountain quaking and fire burning, but in the gentle descent of the Spirit who broods over the womb of Mary of Nazareth. And as at the first creation life was called forth, so now the first cell of the new creation is conceived. The Shekinah, the cloud of the presence of the Most High, overshadows Mary (cf. Exod 40:35), and the Son of God is at home among us. During Advent the

Liturgy of the Word tells us that we bump into God in strange places: in the poor, in crowds, and, strangest of all, in the obscure village of Nazareth and one of its backwater young women. Mary is a powerless female in a world ruled by males; poor, in a highly stratified society; found to be pregnant before she cohabits with her husband, and so obviously not carrying his child to validate her existence. That she would have "found favor with God" is hugely surprising, especially to Mary!

The Lukan biblical imagination has captured the imagination of artists down through the centuries. With their own prophetic insight, they have set the extraordinary faith of Mary among familiar things: a half-read book, a meal in preparation, a door opened on children and animals at play, people passing by. One of the more unusual depictions is that by Henry Ossawa Tanner, an African American painter (1859–1937). In a Middle Eastern-style bedroom, Mary

sits enfolded in the heavy drapes of bedclothes and her own robe, her gaze attentive. All is simplicity, not luxury, and there is no winged angel. What Mary's gaze is fixed on is a tall, thin pillar of white cloud at the end of her bed. Perhaps Tanner is remembering the presence of God, the "angel" of Exodus 14:19, described as a cloud, that led the Israelites into their future, would lead Mary into hers, and will lead us through the ordinary and familiar events and places where God is present—if we will only recognize him and respond with our own, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word."

Every Advent we are challenged to have the attentiveness of Mary to the flutter of Christ-life that stirs in the womb of our complacency. So often our world seems starved of stars; and so often we watch or participate in rituals of mourning for acts of terrorism, natural disaster, the local tragedies of road deaths, or other dark events. Usually in these rituals there are candles: small pieces of self-consuming wax and flame that say light has more right to exist in our world than darkness. This is the message, too, of our Advent wreath as we light the last of its four candles. But those candles, like all ritual candles, will burn out. It is up to us, disciples of the Light of the World, to catch fire from Christ's mystery and bring something of this fire and light into our own lives and, especially, into the lives of those for whom Christmas may not be a feast of joy but a time of darkness that stirs painful memories of those with whom they can no longer celebrate because of death, separation, divorce, family quarrels. For the friendless, the homeless, the abused, Christmas may arouse bitter comparisons and regrets. The fire we catch from Christ, our readiness to



be consumed like him in the flame of loving service of our sisters and brothers, may be as simple a gift as a visit, a letter, a phone call, an invitation to a meal, a present on the parish “Giving Tree.” But it will mean that, together, we will truly celebrate something of a “Happy Christmas.”

### **Focusing the Gospel**

**Key words and phrases:** “[O]f his kingdom there will be no end.”

**To the point:** Throughout the gospels, Jesus preaches the imminence of the kingdom of God and calls for those “with ears to hear” to “repent and believe.” We could say the first person to hear of and draw near to this kingdom is Mary. Gabriel tells her that the child she will bear “will be called holy, the Son of God.” In Mary’s reliance and trust in God’s word, the kingdom takes root in her, just as it wishes to take root in each of us.

### **Connecting the Gospel**

**to the first reading:** In the first reading, God chastises David, the king, for believing it is up to him to build a house for God to dwell in. And yet, in the gospel, we find God gladly choosing to make a home in Mary, the young woman from Nazareth. This is the kind of dwelling that God desires—not one made of stone, brick, or marble, but within the hearts of his people.

**to experience:** Mary’s words of assent, “May it be done to me according to your word,” offer us a challenging model of trust and collaboration with God. Mary’s “yes” to God’s will in her life changes everything, not only for her, but within the history of salvation. Each day we are invited to cooperate in God’s desire to bring us to fullness of life. How will we answer this invitation today?

### **Connecting the Responsorial Psalm**

**to the readings:** Today’s psalm seems to convey joy, praise, and thanksgiving, so it might be surprising to discover it is titled as “[a] Lament over God’s Promise to David” in the New American Bible Revised Edition. Many verses after the ones proclaimed today found the reason for lamentation: “But now you have rejected and spurned, / been enraged at your anointed . . . You have exalted the right hand of his foes, / have gladdened all his enemies” (vv. 39, 43; NABRE). It is noteworthy that the words of praise and trust that we pray today were first sung in the context of defeat rather than victory. It is one thing to praise God in times of peace and abundance, and quite another to say, “For ever I will sing the goodness of the Lord” when facing ruin and uncertainty. Perhaps this is the only kind of faith strong enough to span from one generation to another.

**to psalmist preparation:** In preparing to cantor today’s psalm, how does it change your understanding of the words to know that it was first sung in a time of sorrow and looming despair? Where, within your community or within the wider world, is the hope of the psalmist most needed?

### **PROMPTS FOR FAITH-SHARING**

In the first reading God promises David, “Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever.” How do you see God’s hand at work building up your family throughout past generations and up to this point?

Our psalm response is, “For ever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.” How are you singing God’s goodness in your life at this moment?

In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul names God as “him who can strengthen you.” Which events, hardships, or trials might God be calling you to turn over to his strengthening power?

Gabriel greets Mary, “Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you.” What is your reaction if you consider these words as directed toward you?