

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

For the fourth and final Sunday of Advent we are brought back to the Gospel of Luke, and its beautiful story of the annunciation. This story is markedly different from that in Matthew, where Joseph learns of Mary's pregnancy in a dream. In Luke, the angel Gabriel (which means "God is my strength") appears to Mary. Gabriel's greeting is repeated each time we pray the Hail Mary and so

we are reminded of this scene. As anyone might be, Mary is "greatly troubled." How often does an angel bear greet-

ings? Upon hearing the news Mary wonders how this can be. In fact, many people today wonder

the same. A virgin birth? How was Jesus conceived? The response given to us is the same

as that given to Mary: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, / and the power of the

Most High will overshadow you." Nothing is impossible for God. This is an act

of God so that the child, Jesus, will rightly be called "the Son of God." His kingdom

will last forever; he will be the Son of the Most High. Many church fathers spoke of

how in that moment the entire plan of God hung in the balance, awaiting Mary's "yes."

Human salvation, a free gift from God, depends upon human cooperation. In other

words, God's gift is not forced but available to be freely accepted. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux wrote, "The

angel awaits an answer; it is time for him to return to God who sent him.

We too are waiting, O Lady, for your word of compassion." We then hear Mary's "fiat," the Latin rendering of "let it be done." And again, according to the church fathers, all heaven rejoices.

Though we celebrated the Annunciation on March 25, precisely nine months prior to Christmas, we read this gospel now, during the Fourth Sunday of Advent, because the incarnation was, in a certain way, dependent upon Mary's response. Later theologians saw in her "yes" a counter to Genesis 3, so that Mary could be called the new Eve. Her response to God was not to step outside the circle of obedience, as we saw in Genesis 3, but to accept God's design and to cooperate. As the response in Genesis led ultimately to human sinfulness and death, Mary's response leads to grace and new life. Perhaps we are not too surprised to learn that of all the gospels it is Luke that has the most to say about women. In Luke's story of the birth of Jesus, Mary plays a central role, setting the stage for centuries of theological reflection.

Living the Paschal Mystery

It can sometimes be difficult to comprehend the human cooperation required for salvation. There can be a tremendous theological emphasis on the graciousness of the gift. Our salvation is not earned, but human cooperation is required. We have many opportunities throughout the day to say "fiat" or "let it be done." There are countless occasions of God's grace breaking into our daily life. When we cooperate with that grace, extraordinary things happen. Though we are not receiving visits from angels with messages of a virgin birth, we do have opportunities to recognize the working of God in the world.



Focusing the Gospel

Luke 1:26-38

Today's gospel on this Sunday before Christmas is Luke's account of the angel Gabriel's appearance to Mary.

God begins the "Christ event" with Mary, a simple Galilean Jewish girl who is at the very bottom of the social ladder of her time; the God who created all things makes the fulfillment of his promise dependent upon one of the most dispossessed and powerless of his creatures. Yet God exalts her humility, her simplicity, her trust in his love and mercy; in Mary, God reveals his "favor" for the poor, the rejected, the abandoned, and the forgotten among us today.

Luke's annunciation story is filled with Old Testament imagery (e.g., the announcement by the angel parallels the announcements of the births of many key figures in salvation history, such as Isaac and Samuel; the "overshadowing" of Mary recalls the cloud of glory covering the tent of the ark and temple in Jerusalem). Mary's yes to Gabriel's words set the stage for the greatest event in human history: the conception and subsequent birth of our Savior.

Focusing the First Reading

2 Sam 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16

"House" is the keyword of today's first reading. At last installed in his own palace in his new capital, King David begins the planning of an equally magnificent house for the ark of the covenant. But the prophet Nathan prophesies that God has another "house" in mind: David, as a father as well as a king, will be the beginning of this "house" or dynasty, fulfilling the hopes of Israel since the exodus—and from this "house" will come God's promised Son of David.

Focusing the Responsorial Psalm

Ps 89:2-3, 4-5, 27, 29 (2a)

The psalmist takes up the theme of God's favor toward David in today's responsorial psalm. Psalm 89 is a song of thanksgiving for what God has done for Israel from its beginning in the Sinai to the raising up of David as king, and a profession of hope in what is to come for God's people.

Focusing the Second Reading

Rom 16:25-27

Today's second reading is the conclusion of Paul's letter to the Romans, the apostle's theological treatise on baptism and justification by faith. Paul concludes his letter to the Christians at Rome praising God for the final and complete revelation of his Word in the gospel: Jesus.

PROMPTS FOR HOMILISTS, CATECHISTS, AND RCIA TEAMS

When have your plans been "interrupted" or your perspective been changed by a moment of revelation?

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Have you ever encountered Gabriel, the messenger of God, in an unexpected situation?

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In what ways can a family home be transformed into a "house" of God?

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How is Mary a model of discipleship?

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What have you learned from the poor, the troubled, the sick, and the desperate about the mystery of God's love?

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