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Boston College School of Theology and Ministry

The Gospels of the Weekday Lectionary

Commentary and Reflections

John F. Craghan



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For

Barbara Lynne

“Ubi enim est thesaurus tuus, ibi est et cor tuum.”

(Matt 6:21)

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Preface

Why only the gospels of the weekday Lectionary and not the first readings? This is indeed a very legitimate question since these readings (mainly from the Old Testament) are also designed to nourish the faith of participants. The simple answer is volume or size. When one considers that there are separate weekday first readings for Year 1 and Year 2, commentary and reflection on them would obviously create an exceedingly bulky tome. Without disparaging the first readings, the gospels enjoy pride of place in the Liturgy of the Word. According to the instruction on the Lectionary, the gospels constitute the high point of the proclamation of the word (13, 36).

While many authors have written on the three-year Sunday cycle along with the appropriate solemnities and feasts, relatively few have devoted attention to the gospels of the weekday Lectionary. To a certain extent this is a lacuna that the present work seeks to address. This is in line with the instruction on the Lectionary that declares that the weekday readings complement the message of salvation presented in the three-year Sunday-Festal Lectionary (65). Thus weeks one through nine cover the Gospel of Mark, weeks ten through twenty-one the Gospel of Matthew, and weeks twenty-two through thirty-four the Gospel of Luke, while the Easter season focuses on the Gospel of John. As a result, the faithful have ample time to absorb the message of each evangelist.

In commenting and reflecting on the gospels of the weekday Lectionary, I have at least three groups in mind. First, I consider the busy parish priest who may wish to develop the message of the evangelists but may not have sufficient time to prepare. Second, I think of the leaders of the Liturgy of the Word with communion service who may wish to apply

the gospel message to their congregations. Third, I envision those people, both religious and lay, who use the weekday gospels for their daily meditation. I hope that both the commentary and reflections will assist them, to some degree, in their prayer life.

Seize the text. It is absolutely imperative to begin with reading the actual biblical text in question. This is based on the conviction that there is no substitute for knowing what the text says. Commentary and reflections presuppose that one has devoted sufficient time to what the four evangelists have written.

A significant number of the commentaries and reflections in this work originally appeared in *Scripture in Church*, a quarterly put out by Dominican Publications of Dublin, Ireland. I am grateful to this publishing house and especially to Fr. Bernard Treacy, OP, the managing editor of *Scripture in Church*, for permission to use them in this work in a somewhat different format.

I dedicate this book to my wife, Barbara Lynne Wenzel Craghan, who gently but firmly challenges me each day to live the Good News. This work, therefore, is a small tribute to her indomitable spirit.

John F. Craghan
Darboy, Wisconsin

The Advent Season

The First Week of Advent

Monday: Matthew 8:5-11 In this episode Jesus reaches out once again to an “outsider” (see the leper in the preceding pericope [8:1-4]). This time the outsider is a Gentile military officer who seeks a cure for his paralyzed servant from Jesus. Having learned proper military discipline in the Roman army, the officer does not require Jesus’ visit to the sick servant—only a word of command is necessary. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Jesus is astonished at the centurion’s faith. It is a faith that Jesus has not found among his own people (the “insiders”).

Reflection. It is precisely this type of faith that must give believers pause. Here they are provided with a conspicuous example of faith in the approach taken by the Gentile officer. He recognizes that Jesus possesses such power that only a word of command suffices to heal the paralyzed servant. This passage challenges believers to assess their own approach to faith. They must ask the question: who is this Jesus? They must reach deep within themselves and affirm that this Jesus demonstrates divine power and compassion to a world all too paralyzed by self-love. The pagan centurion urges modern followers of this same Jesus to revive their faith and readmit him into their daily concerns.

Tuesday: Luke 10:21-24 Here Luke has Jesus react to the success of the disciples’ mission in 10:17-20. His reaction is twofold: (1) praise of God as his Father, and (2) a statement about the unique standing of the disciples as witnesses to his ministry and teaching. In the first reaction, Luke has Jesus focus attention on the nature of the Father and the Son. This underlines not only God as Father but also Jesus as his Son.

Jesus thus emerges as the revealer because of this unique relationship with the Father. In the second reaction, Luke has Jesus praise the disciples not merely for seeing and hearing in general but for the special revelation that they have seen and heard.

Reflection. The intimacy expressed by Jesus must rivet the attention of believers. There is, first of all, the intimacy that exists between the Father and Jesus. Second, there is the intimacy that exists between Jesus and the disciples. This twofold intimacy clearly shows that to accept Jesus is to belong to the family of Jesus. As Jesus will point out in 11:2-4, disciples have the right to address God as “Father.” This God, therefore, is not a remote celestial being shielded from the concerns of human life. Rather, this God is the Father who involves himself in human problems. In addition, Jesus and his disciples enjoy a special bond by sharing a common mission and a common revelation. As members of Jesus’ extended family, believers possess not only a unique status but also the obligation to live up to the family name. Intimacy means both rights and duties.

Wednesday: Matthew 15:29-37 This passage contains two scenes that highlight Jesus’ compassion: (1) the healing of the sick and (2) the feeding of the four thousand. In the first scene, Jesus ascends the mountain—a geographical setting that implies a revelation. The various kinds of sick persons (the lame, blind, maimed, etc.) remind the reader of passages such as Isaiah 35:5-6 in which the glory of God manifests itself in the healing of such people. It is hardly surprising that the crowds not only are astonished but also break out into praise of the God of Israel. In the second scene, it is Jesus’ compassion that explicitly moves him to feed the crowds. The disciples’ question about their inability to feed such a multitude serves only to heighten Jesus’ concern for the people’s needs.

Reflection. This dimension of compassion must provoke not only admiration but also imitation. To be sure, miracle working after the manner of Jesus surpasses human capability. Nonetheless compassion easily adopts a multitude of shapes and forms. A word of encouragement to the depressed, a visit to the homebound, a gift to the financially strapped, etc., manifest Jesus’ ongoing concern for these and similar people. For believers, the mountain must serve as the place of revelation.

Where followers of Jesus provide for others, his revelation or message becomes all too evident.

Thursday: Matthew 7:21, 24-27 In the opening verse Matthew contrasts saying and doing. He categorically states that to utter the name of the Lord is patently inadequate. Believers must also do the will of the Father. Doing thus becomes the condition for entering the kingdom. Matthew next states this opposition in terms of hearing and doing. He contrasts the wise man and the foolish man. The wise man builds his house on rock so that it can withstand all the forces of nature. The foolish man, however, builds his house on sand and so is unable to survive the fury of nature.

Reflection. This conclusion to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount speaks volumes to believers even today. It is so easy to mouth pious platitudes and recite the teachings of the faith. It is another matter, however, to reduce them to action. This gospel passage leaves believers with lingering questions: will they build on solid rock and thus become doers or will they build on sand and thus become only hearers? Advent provides a special time for reflecting on such methods of construction.

Friday: Matthew 9:27-31 In this miracle story Matthew underlines once again the compassionate mission of Jesus. By having the two blind men address Jesus as "Son of David," Matthew reminds his audience of the ideal Messiah King who "has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy" (Ps 72:13). After the two men have persevered in following Jesus, he raises the question of their faith. For Matthew, faith in the power of Jesus is the absolute condition for healing.

Reflection. This account must remind believers that faith consists in much more than a list of propositions that one accepts and can recite on the proper liturgical occasion. Faith is, first and foremost, the acceptance of a person. Believers ground themselves in the person of their God and are thus prepared to accept articles of faith. Who finally is this person to whom believers commit themselves entirely? Perhaps the two blind men serve as the fitting response to this question. They are rooted in the person of Jesus, the Lord and Son of David, who can overcome

their blindness merely by his touch. The faith approach taken by these two blind men must encourage believers to do likewise.

Saturday: Matthew 9:35–10:1, 5a, 6-8 The concluding verses in chapter 9 look forward to the missionary discourse in chapter 10. The sight of the crowds moves Jesus to compassion. They resemble helpless, exhausted sheep deprived of a shepherd. Jesus reads this scene in terms of a great harvest in which his disciples will play a key role by bringing the Good News to others. At the same time, given the scarcity of laborers, one must beg the Father, the lord of the harvest, to provide. By summoning the twelve disciples and sharing his mission with them, Jesus provides an answer to this prayer. Limiting themselves to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, they are to announce the arrival of the kingdom as Jesus did.

Reflection. This passage in Matthew may strike believers as the sole prerogative of the Twelve. Their temptation is thus to exempt themselves from bringing the Good News to others. By their baptism, however, believers become priests, prophets, and kings or queens. They are not only entitled to preach the Good News but also compelled to do so. Such proclamation of the Gospel message is not confined to pulpits and places of worship. In the seemingly insignificant events of daily living believers discover the setting for extending Jesus' mission. This missionary discourse is both the challenge and the inspiration to exercise the ministry of preaching the Good News.

The Second Week of Advent

Monday: Luke 5:17-26 In this episode, some men, having heard of Jesus' healing power, attempt to bring their paralyzed friend to Jesus. They awkwardly ascend the roof, carrying the paralytic on his mat—a mode of transportation that no doubt provokes considerable grumbling from the crowd. At this point Luke remarks that Jesus, on witnessing the faith of the mat bearers, not the faith of the paralytic, offers forgiveness to the sick man. To demonstrate that he possesses the power to forgive sins, Jesus then heals the paralytic, commanding him to take up his mat and return home.

Reflection. What must capture the attention of believers is that Jesus eventually cures the paralytic because of the faith of others, namely, the mat bearers. Genuine faith, therefore, has the capacity to touch others to such a point that the seemingly unimaginable (a miracle) becomes possible. Believers demonstrate such faith in what may seem to be the monotonous events of everyday life. At home, at work, at play, at social events, etc., believers have the capacity to transform society. The world stands in dire need of such infectious faith.

Tuesday: Matthew 18:12-14 In this discourse Matthew insists that the community must provide for the little ones, namely, those unimportant disciples who can all too easily go astray because they are neglected. To make his point, Matthew introduces the parable of the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep on the mountains and searches for the one sheep that has gone astray. In turn, disciples must search for the Christian sheep that has wandered away from the fold and thus violate purely human calculations by leaving the ninety-nine. The one endangered sheep takes precedence over the rest. Such relentless care for one sheep does not spring from an impersonal command but from the will of the Father.

Reflection. Such neglected disciples are to be found in every community. Matthew appears to urge believers to lay aside their cold objective calculations in order to focus on the one that has strayed. In the final analysis, salvation hinges, not on purely personal holiness, but on a communal holiness that envisions everyone as worthy of one's time and attention. In this parable, therefore, the role of community is clearly paramount. Disciples are not isolated individuals linked egotistically to their God. Rather, disciples are community members who see themselves as inexorably bound to their God in the company of others, particularly the more fragile ones.

Wednesday: Matthew 11:28-30 In this passage Jesus offers a share in the unique relationship he has outlined in 11:25-27 (the mutual knowledge of the Father and Son in which the disciple shares). Speaking like Lady Wisdom (see Prov 8-9), he invites all who find the Pharisaic law a heavy yoke (see Matt 23:4) to accept his own yoke. He appeals

to the religious outsiders whom the Pharisees criticize for not keeping the law. The yoke proposed here is bound up with the very person of Jesus—the yoke is Jesus himself. He offers himself as the embodiment of gentleness and humility. To accept Jesus is to attain that final rest that the weekly Sabbath symbolizes.

Reflection. In seeking guides for Christian living, some disciples occasionally bypass Christ. They explore the world of power and prestige but conclude they are not the genuine article. They extrapolate models from the entertainment world but soon realize that they are at least ersatz and, at worst, self-destructive. Today's passage identifies the scribes and the Pharisees as seeking to find the norm for living in the law. Disregarding the personal thrust of Israel's covenant faith, they concentrate on obligations and prohibitions—on things, not a person. For Matthew, Jesus is the message. He seeks to root people in his person. To accept his person is to know peace. To acknowledge his person is to learn humility and gentleness. The law simply will not do. Accept no substitutes—only Jesus will do.

Thursday: Matthew 11:11-15 For Matthew, while there is no greater human being than John the Baptist, those who commit themselves to Jesus in the coming of the kingdom will enjoy a higher status. It is not that John is excluded but that the Lord is free to give. Those who oppose this kingdom, however, attempt to thwart its coming and block out those who would like to receive it. Significantly, John belongs not to the old age of prophecy but to the new age of the kingdom. Both the Prophets and the Law find their fulfillment in John as he, being more than a prophet, prepares God's people for the coming of the Messiah and final judgment.

Reflection. As believers observe in the Our Father, the kingdom is still in the process of coming. Hence they must also participate in this process. Like John the Baptist, through their special gifts and talents, they attempt to make the kingdom a greater reality. In effect, this passage in Matthew is the clarion call to action—believers cannot sit idly by and merely yearn for the coming of the kingdom. They must heed Jesus' summons to join forces with figures such as the Baptist and make the kingdom a greater reality with each passing day.

Friday: Matthew 11:16-19 In this episode Matthew presents Jesus as complaining that his contemporaries have not listened and acted appropriately. Like the children in the marketplace, they have declined the gift of salvation offered by John the Baptist and Jesus. The Baptist practiced asceticism, but they interpreted his noneating and nondrinking as nothing less than diabolical possession. Jesus displays a more congenial type of table fellowship, but they reject it as gluttony and drunkenness. Both John the Baptist and Jesus, therefore, experience rejection. Nonetheless Jesus as God's wisdom will be eventually vindicated.

Reflection. This passage addresses modern believers and their capacity to interpret and judge correctly. God works out the plan of salvation in everyday life. Believers must choose between what is genuine and what is phony. Will they accept as models those who flaunt power, prestige, and status, or will they opt to emulate those who exhibit compassion, thoughtfulness, and justice? Will Jesus and those who imitate him emerge as their only viable option?

Saturday: Matthew 17:9a, 10-13 This scene captures the descent of Jesus and the disciples from the mount of the transfiguration. The disciples quote the opinion of the scribes that Elijah will return from heaven before the Messiah comes. Jesus responds by citing the text of Malachi and seeing its fulfillment in the person of John the Baptist. Unfortunately Israel did not recognize the Baptist as the returning Elijah and subsequently put him to death. Jesus adds that he too will experience the same fate. The transfigured Jesus is also the Suffering Son of Man.

Reflection. This great paradox of suffering and death as the condition for glory must energize modern believers. Although for Jesus' audience a crucified Messiah is a contradiction in terms, for Jesus as well as for all disciples only suffering and death can usher in the transformation of the resurrection. For today's disciples it may not be the expectation of actual physical martyrdom that confronts them. Rather, the reality of the cross emerges in everyday life. There are always the conflicts between Jesus' values and those of a hostile and unbelieving world. In opting for Jesus' values, disciples will experience pain and frustration. Paradoxically such experiences are the raw material for birth into glory.

The Third Week of Advent

Monday: Matthew 21:23-27 In this episode the Jewish authorities ask Jesus about the nature and origin of his authority. Responding with a counterquestion, Jesus asks them about the origin and hence the authority of John's baptism. This counterquestion dumbfounds his opponents. If they acknowledge that his baptism came from heaven (God), they accuse themselves of refusing to repent. If they admit that his baptism was purely human, they provoke the anger of the common people who revered John as a martyred prophet. Not surprisingly the Jewish authorities refuse to take a stand on Jesus' question. Jesus, Israel's genuine teacher, has triumphed over its false teachers.

Reflection. For modern disciples this passage raises troubling questions about the source of a person's authority. All too often, it seems, people look to extrinsic proof for authority, e.g., academic degrees or the commendation of superiors. This episode, however, may force them to consider the genuineness of a person's words and deeds as the basis of authority. Clearly the common people recognized John the Baptist's authority from his message and especially his death as a martyr. Do modern followers of Jesus dare to recognize his presence and his authority in what they say and do? Personal honesty has its own way of vindicating itself.

Tuesday: Matthew 21:28-32 In the parable Matthew contrasts the sayers but non-doers (the second son) with the non-sayers but doers (the first son). Matthew then has Jesus speak about the social outcasts (the tax collectors and prostitutes). The outcasts reacted to the manner and message of the Baptist and thus repented. The Jewish leaders, however, remained recalcitrant and so did not repent. From Matthew's perspective the sayers but non-doers are the Jewish community represented by its leaders (the chief priests and elders). The non-sayers but doers are the Gentiles represented by the social outcasts. The parable may originally have defended Jesus' preaching of the Good News to outcasts. But as the text now reads, there is a clear dichotomy between those who reject and those who accept outcasts.

Reflection. Matthew's message urges today's disciples to accept his standard for admission into the kingdom: welcome all, reject no one.

Imperceptibly people appear to establish criteria whereby only certain categories of people are really “good” people—the rest do not merit their attention or consideration. Nonetheless Matthew maintains that believers should dismantle such criteria and thus view all people from Jesus’ vantage point. Final selection is God’s prerogative, not theirs.

Wednesday: Luke 7:18b-23 The imprisoned John the Baptist sends disciples to Jesus to inquire if he is the expected Messiah (“the one who is to come”). Probably the Baptist believes that the stories of Jesus’ compassion and his message of love and forgiveness do not match his own preaching of fire and damnation. Significantly John’s disciples arrive at the very moment when Jesus is performing miracles for the sick and distressed. Jesus replies to John’s messengers that his actions fulfill the time of messianic deliverance foreseen by the prophet Isaiah (see Isa 35:5-6). This is what the messengers must report to the Baptist. The episode concludes with the statement that truly blessed is the person who is not scandalized by Jesus.

Reflection. This passage contains two different views about the role of the Messiah. For the Baptist, the Messiah must thunder hell and damnation; for Jesus, the Messiah must perform works of mercy. No one will dispute the role of rigorous preaching of the absolute need to repent. Jesus, however, chooses to provoke God’s kingdom by deeds of compassion whereby especially the marginalized become the beneficiaries. Modern believers can take Jesus’ view to heart by demonstrating God’s involvement with the world (the kingdom) by assisting those in need. In so doing, they will not be scandalized by Jesus’ *modus agendi*.

Thursday: Luke 7:24-30 Jesus’ testimony clearly relates John the Baptist to God’s plan of salvation. John is neither a reed shaken by the wind nor one dressed in elegant clothes. Rather, he is a prophet—indeed, much more than prophet. In fact, he is: (1) Elijah who has returned; (2) one greater than all other human beings; and (3) Jesus’ precursor, the messenger sent ahead of him. All the people, including the tax collectors, by listening to John’s message and receiving his baptism, approved God’s plan of salvation. The Pharisees and the lawyers, on the contrary, rejected John’s baptism and thus frustrated that plan.

Reflection. This passage focuses attention on God's plan of salvation by contrasting the response of all the people, on the one hand, and that of the Pharisees and the lawyers, on the other hand. Nevertheless, this divine plan is not limited to the time of Jesus—it involves all followers of Jesus here and now. Specifically one's vocation in life forms an essential element of that plan. Whether married, single, widowed, divorced, etc., followers of Jesus by faithfully carrying out their vocation join the ranks of all the people in the gospel passage. Unlike the Pharisees and the lawyers, they choose not to thwart God's plan by duly acknowledging their commitment to God and one another.

Friday: John 5:33-36 The background for this discourse is Jesus' defense of his healing on the Sabbath. In this particular section Jesus presents the following witnesses for his action: (1) John the Baptist and (2) his own works. John witnessed to Jesus as the Lamb of God and the Son of God. John is here described as a burning and shining lamp whose light Jesus' audience rejoiced in for a while. But that audience now refuses to accept the one to whom John witnessed. At this point Jesus refers to a testimony greater than John's, namely, his own works whose accomplishment demonstrates that the Father has indeed sent him.

Reflection. This passage speaks of credentials, witnesses, and testimony. While the Baptist's testimony and Jesus' own works provide more than ample proof that the Father sent him, believers may raise the question of the credibility of their own testimony. How do they show a hostile and unbelieving world that Jesus has sent them as witnesses? To be sure, they cannot appeal to the works or miracles they have performed. They can perhaps, however, point to their lifestyles. Service to others in whatever form over a period of time is indeed a significant credential. For example, to offer hope to the discouraged and a sense of future to the depressed is no mean achievement.

December 17–24: The Weekdays of Advent

December 17: Matthew 1:1-17 Matthew's genealogy explains the identity of Jesus: son of David (embracing Jewish members of the community) and son of Abraham (including Gentile members; see Gen

22:18). Matthew thus demonstrates how God has provided for all of humanity. He works this out artistically by arranging three sections of fourteen generations. He also introduces five women into the genealogy where the combination of irregularity and divine intervention is central. Thus Tamar, a Canaanite outsider, pretending to be a prostitute, committed incest with her father-in-law Judah but nonetheless continued the line of the Messiah. Rahab, another Canaanite outsider and a real prostitute, provided the help whereby Joshua ultimately conquered Jericho. Ruth, a Moabite outsider and a widow, contributed to God's plan by becoming the great-grandmother of David. Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, committed adultery with David but also bore him Solomon, thus continuing the Messiah's line. Finally there is Mary, the wife of Joseph and a virgin, who becomes the mother of the Messiah.

Reflection. It is a question of roots. In his genealogy Matthew informs his audience that Jesus belongs to a history and a people. Believers also have their own history and national heritages. They think automatically of their families and the people from whom they are descended. Nonetheless Matthew's genealogy challenges them to think of other roots. Specifically they too are part of the genealogy that includes Jesus. As believers, they have, therefore, not only a history but also a destiny. That destiny implies that they live up to the family name by their ongoing fidelity to Jesus' message, even though some of their forebears may have tarnished the family name. Ultimately they are to view themselves as members of a community of believers who must reach out to others and thus share their patrimony with them. The genealogy must mean Good News for everyone.

December 18: Matthew 1:18-25 This passage is an expanded footnote that explains the irregularity in the genealogy. If Jesus has no human father, then how can he be called "son of David" (1:1)? This footnote explains that Joseph was perplexed but that because of the angel's revelation he was willing to accept legal paternity. Hence in 1:20 Joseph is addressed as "son of David." Rereading the Greek text of Isaiah 7:14, Matthew indicates that Jesus will be Emmanuel ("God is with us"), a theme that he picks up at the very end of the gospel (28:20) where Jesus assures the community: "I am with you always . . ."

Joseph's generous response makes this abiding presence initially possible.

Reflection. In this account Matthew has Joseph demonstrate that human response does make a difference. Instead of dropping out of the marriage and thus refusing legal paternity, Joseph opts to be the catalyst for realizing God's plan of salvation. Followers of Jesus are challenged to emulate Joseph's example. In the circumstances of their daily lives they have the opportunity to respond to God's plan by developing married love, by caring for their families, by demanding justice in their jobs, etc. Joseph is indeed a man for all seasons, a model for all ages.

December 19: Luke 1:5-25 In preparing his readers for the future mission of the Baptist, Luke adds a distinctively Old Testament flavor to this account by presenting the barren couple (Zechariah and Elizabeth) as a latter-day model of Abraham and Sarah as well as Elkanah and Hannah. In this announcement of birth Zechariah experiences fear when Gabriel informs him of the birth of a son. Overwhelmed by such news, Zechariah asks the angel how all this is possible, given his and his wife's advanced ages. Gabriel replies that, because Zechariah does not believe this message, he will be unable to speak until the blessed event takes place. Here response to God's message plays the pivotal role—a role that Luke will develop in the annunciation to Mary.

Reflection. In this episode faith makes all the difference in the world. It demands that disciples open themselves up to God's world of surprises. In essence, it requires followers of Jesus to trust their God, even and especially when the divine message appears to make no sense in the face of purely human calculations. Believers today can sense Zechariah's bewilderment and reluctance to believe. They are bidden, however, not to follow Zechariah's example by accepting a God of surprises who does not operate according to typically human equations. To believe in this God is to ground oneself in a God of surprises who can overcome not only barrenness but also any and all obstacles that people experience. To believe or not to believe—that is the question!

December 20: Luke 1:26-38 In this annunciation of birth Luke clearly contrasts Mary's response to that of Zechariah. Many components are similar, e.g., the recipient's fear, the message (here Jesus as

Son of God and Davidic Messiah), and the question (the apparent impossibility of compliance because of Mary's virginal status). Gabriel replies that this conception will take place through God's creative Spirit. After receiving a sign (Elizabeth's conception) that she does not request, Mary in contrast to Zechariah opens herself up completely to God's will: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord" (1:38). Mary's faith and her role as the Lord's servant will receive greater attention as Luke proceeds with his account.

Reflection. It is Mary's openness to God's will that must command attention. Luke presents her as initially perplexed by Gabriel's message. After Gabriel's revelation about the virginal conception, however, Luke portrays Mary of Nazareth as totally committed to God's plan for her. In saying yes, she becomes an integral part of the great plan of salvation. It is this openness that must speak to the situation of modern disciples. All human beings experience collision of wills, namely, what God wants and what they want. They seem to see only part of the intricate divine plan and prefer to choose that. In this scene, however, Mary urges modern believers to dare to trust that God's will for them involves a much larger picture. This handmaid of the Lord continues to make this appeal: look beyond yourselves and dare to be open.

December 21: Luke 1:39-45 Mary's haste in going into the hill country to visit Elizabeth reflects her obedience to God's plan. She hears Elizabeth's Spirit-filled exclamation that she is blessed among women and the fruit of her womb is blessed. These blessings are indeed appropriate because of the child in her womb. Elizabeth, however, follows up such blessings with a beatitude. She states that Mary is indeed fortunate since she accepts in faith the fulfillment of what God told her. Once again Luke accentuates the faith of this woman. She receives blessings because of her child but she receives a beatitude from Elizabeth because of a personal quality, namely, a deep and abiding faith.

Reflection. For Luke, Mary's journey into the hill country is more than a matter of a family visit. It follows upon Gabriel's message of Elizabeth's pregnancy and thus reveals Mary as an active participant in the plan of God. Having opened herself up entirely to that plan, Mary inexorably pursues it. This visitation scene speaks to disciples' own involvement in God's Providence. Instead of being idle onlookers, they

are called upon to play their part in God's destiny for themselves and others. By living out the implications of their vocation, they find themselves involved, like Mary, in a journey. Only the geography is different. Theirs is not a trek into the hill country. Rather, it is the relentless, almost restless, movement of meeting their obligations to others whether at home, at play, at work, or wherever. Their openness to God's directives will ensure the success of their journey.

December 22: Luke 1:46-56 The *Magnificat* is a psalm of declarative praise or thanksgiving that serves as a mosaic of Old Testament passages focusing on Jesus' coming. (The canticle of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-10 that follows upon the birth of her son Samuel greatly influences this composition.) After an introduction underlining Mary's limitless joy, the canticle provides motives for praising God, e.g., the overcoming of her lowliness (virginity is tantamount to barrenness) and the Exodus-like accomplishments ("great things"). Verses 51-52 anticipate the victory to be won by Jesus' death and resurrection, namely, the time of the manifestation of God's power and Jesus' exaltation to God's right hand. Verse 53 emphasizes reversal strategy ("the hungry" versus "the rich"). The conclusion (v. 55) states that God has acted in accordance with the promises made to Abraham and his descendants.

Reflection. In her *Magnificat* Mary reveals in her exuberant praise the ability to break free from the restraints of egoism and to advance beyond the perimeters of focus on self. This extraordinary capacity to praise must impact modern disciples. While they may not find it overly difficult to praise God, they may find it much more challenging to praise the accomplishments of others. For some strange reason many judge the time of death to be the appropriate occasion to laud the goodness and generosity of others. The *Magnificat*, however, encourages them to battle the insidious forces of their ego and break out now into the hymn of creation: "It is good, very good."

December 23: Luke 1:57-66 In this account of the birth and naming of John the Baptist, Elizabeth's delivery smacks of the Old Testament where the once barren wives of the patriarchs bear a child (or children) and thus provoke an atmosphere of intense joy. When the neighbors and relatives come to learn of the divinely arranged concep-

tion and birth, they begin to surmise the future greatness of the Baptist by the couple's agreement on the unexpected name of John. Zechariah's regained speech directs the reader to Gabriel's prediction in 1:20. However, the miracle obviously enhances the amazement of all those present. This is Luke's device for foreshadowing John's greatness (yet a greatness subordinate to that of Jesus).

Reflection. In addition to the intense joy of the couple's neighbors and relatives there are two other reactions: amazement (v. 63) and fear (v. 65). Such reactions speak volumes in today's world where hope is too often in short supply. Amazement conjures up the image of an event that shatters human expectations. Fear connotes the dimension of awe, a situation in which one is simply overwhelmed by God's intervention. Given all the circumstances surrounding the Baptist's birth and naming, these reactions of amazement and fear merit much more than passing attention. As believers approach the birth and naming of Jesus, such reactions assume even greater significance. In these events God overwhelms and bewilders believers. Although the word "awesome" is bandied about all too freely these days, nonetheless, the events of the birth and naming of Jesus are truly awesome.

December 24: Luke 1:67-79 Like the *Magnificat*, the *Benedictus* is a hymn of declarative praise or a thanksgiving in which Zechariah blesses God for the gift of his son. However, Luke adds in verses 76-77 that God's present involvement in Israel stems from the Lord whose way the Baptist will prepare. The two strophes in the piece (vv. 68-71 and vv. 72-73) announce what God has accomplished for his people Israel and what God has done "for us" (vv. 69, 73), fulfilling the promises to both Abraham and David. This canticle, therefore, relives the narrative of the great ancestors of Israel and its hopes but moves on to see these expectations fulfilled in Jesus. The language of praise serves as the appropriate medium for linking hope (Abraham and David) and realization (Jesus).

Reflection. This account of exuberant praise at the birth and naming of the Baptist may speak to the celebration of Christian baptism. On such an occasion believers rejoice at the birth of the child and his or her new name. Essentially they celebrate the incorporation of the newly baptized into the family of the church. He or she has become heir to the

promises to Israel and their fulfillment in Jesus. As a new member of this family, the newly baptized assumes obligations through the sponsors that he or she will live up to the family name and honor—a commitment symbolized by the baptismal garment and candle. The *Benedictus* is an appropriate expression of divine praise and human involvement on such an occasion.