

Preaching the Scriptures
of the
Masses of the
Blessed Virgin Mary

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David O. Brown, OSM



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ADVENT SEASON

In Advent, the church celebrates the coming of the Lord. This is illustrated with the first three formulae of the collection. Each helps us to look forward to, and at the same time celebrate, the coming of the Lord. The faith with which we celebrate each of these feasts gives full meaning to the Scripture passages that we use.



1. THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY, CHOSEN DAUGHTER OF ISRAEL

Exegesis of the First Reading: Genesis 12:1-7

God spoke to our ancestors, to Abraham and his seed for ever.

In this Scripture passage, the Lord instructs Abraham and his wife Sarah: "Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk / and from your father's house to a land that I will show you." In obedience, they "went as the LORD directed." In this passage we find the beginning of salvation history. The movement away from God recounted in the first eleven chapters of the book of Genesis is now reversed. These words describing Abraham's obedience are among the most important words ever spoken in the Scriptures. The obedience of Abraham and Sarah to the Lord initiates the plan of salvation, which will unfold in Moses, the prophets, and the kings and find its embodiment in Israel. The Lord God initiates this change and initiates a covenant with his people, with Mary as an instrument.

Exegesis of the Alternate First Reading: 2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8b-11, 16

The Lord God will give to him the throne of his father, David.

This passage from the book of Samuel about King David reminds us in a very vivid fashion of the difference between the divine and

the human. King David had unified the kingdom, made Jerusalem the capital, and was at peace. So, he mused, it was time to do something for God; he would build a temple. Nathan the prophet too saw with human eyes until the Lord spoke to him. Nathan was to remind the king that all he had experienced from being a shepherd to being a soldier to being king was God's work, not David's. And God's work would continue. "Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me"—through Mary, the Chosen Daughter of Israel.

Exegesis of the Gospel Reading: Matthew 1:1-17

A genealogy of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham.

Matthew's gospel traces the ancestry of Jesus back to Abraham. Saint Luke in his gospel will trace the ancestry of Jesus all the way back to Adam. The reason for the difference is that the evangelists were writing to different audiences. Luke will be writing to Christian communities that are, for the most part, Gentiles, who are neither aware of nor concerned so much about the ancestry of Jesus.

Matthew was writing for the Jewish community. His purpose is to show that Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecies and hopes of Israel, beginning with Abraham continuing through to David. Later in the gospel St. Matthew makes a reference to the family of Jesus but does not mention its Davidic origins. But after the fall of Jerusalem, when the Christians were being criticized, they wanted to show that they belonged and so wanted to assert the Davidic kinship of Jesus.

The inclusion of the four women who contribute to the establishment of the Davidic kinship indicates that salvation is for all, saint and sinner, Jew and Gentile. Thus, the kingdom established by Jesus is not a secret, purely heavenly kingdom but rather one rooted in the human community, of lowly origin and laborious growth, one that has known sin.

Joseph was of this lineage; he was the husband of Mary. "Of Mary was born Jesus who is called the Messiah."

PURPOSE: In the unbroken sweep of salvation history, Mary is a bridge between the old and the new.

SUMMARY: We may want to use the image of a mosaic as a way to illustrate the content of this feast. Each individual stone in a mosaic has its own shape, beauty, and value. One may take it in one's hand and admire its

worth and brilliance. When it is placed in its proper place in the final picture, it reveals even more as it contributes to the charm of the whole.

MUSINGS:

1. Revelation began with Adam and Eve, but the tremendous story of salvation and redemption begins to unfold with the choice of Abraham. He was obedient to the will of the Lord God. He was not sure where his journey would lead, but he “went as the LORD directed.”

2. This passage gives just a glimpse into the life of Abraham and Sarah, but it shows us how clearly the Lord God chooses his children to carry out his will.

3. When the Lord God said to Abraham that he will make his name great and that all generations will be blessed in him, do we not see here a foretaste of the blessing the Lord God was to bestow on Mary and through her all her children?

4. David’s intention was to build a place for the ark of the covenant. The ark was a precious container that held the stones on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed, the staff of Moses with which he had parted the Red Sea, and some of the manna that had sustained them in the desert. All of these were the sign of the presence of God among his people. How much more will the womb of the Chosen Daughter of Israel house the real presence of God among his people?

5. Abraham built an altar to the Lord God to honor the One who appeared to him; we are about to approach our altar to give God all praise.

6. We use only a small portion of the story of Abraham and Sarah, but the whole story is filled with allusions in which we see the place of Mary in the story of salvation.

7. The ark was the repository of the stones of the covenant and the staff of Moses. It was the sign of the presence and power of God on earth. Mary, in her own body, will be the true ark of the covenant, the real sign of God’s presence on earth.

8. The passage from the book of Samuel reminds us in a special way of how the Lord God renewed his covenant with his people in David. It was from the descendants of David that the Redeemer would come.

9. These images, pictures, illustrations, and allusions are confirmed when we read the Gospel of Matthew. He was writing to Jewish followers of Jesus about the year 70. As St. Matthew searches the Scriptures to show that Jesus is the Messiah and the fulfillment of the prophecies,

we can conclude with him that Mary is truly “the Chosen Daughter of Israel.”

RELATION TO THE EUCHARIST: The story of salvation is the story of faith and it is with faith we approach each celebration.

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2. THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY AND THE ANNUNCIATION OF THE LORD

Exegesis of the First Reading: Isaiah 7:10-14, 8:10c

The virgin will conceive.

The church has always considered the Scriptures as a single source whether from the Old or New Testament. So when Isaiah was writing about 755 years before Christ, his writing is considered as though they were speaking of Christ at least indirectly. At the time of Isaiah the kingdom of David had divided into the kingdom of Judah and the kingdom of Israel. Ahaz, the king of Judah, was being besieged by several armies intent on putting an end to his kingdom.

The sign proposed by Isaiah had two goals. The first was concerned with the preservation of Judah in the midst of distress (cf. Isa 7:15, 17). More especially it was concerned with the fulfillment of God's earlier promise to David (2 Sam 7:12-16). Both of these goals would be achieved in the coming of Immanuel, meaning, "With us is God." He would be the ideal king (cf. Isa 9:5-6; 11:1-5). The prophet did not know the full force of his words. The church has always seen the fulfillment of this verse in the birth of Jesus. Some Catholic writers have seen a preliminary and partial fulfillment in the conception and birth of the future King Hezekiah, whose mother, at the time Isaiah spoke, would have been a young, unmarried woman (in Hebrew, *almah*). The Holy Spirit was preparing, however, for another Nativity, which alone would fulfill the terms of Immanuel's mission.

Exegesis of the Gospel Reading: Luke 1:26-38

You will conceive and bear a son.

This passage of Scripture is technically called a "midrash." It is a Hebrew expression that means in addition to the story it is telling on the surface, it also has a deeper meaning that we can find by exploring other passages of Scripture. We will find this literary device frequently in this collection of Masses. The story told here is very familiar to us. Behind and beneath the story, we need to know that the prophet Daniel prophesied that in seventy weeks the kingdom would come (Dan 8:16; 9:21, 24-26). Counting from the appearance of the angel Gabriel to Zechariah in the temple until the birth of Jesus, we have those seventy weeks!

The angel Gabriel was sent from God and uses words that the prophets Zephaniah (3:16) and Zechariah (9:9) had applied to Jerusalem. Gabriel now applies them to Mary. He announces that the privileges of Jerusalem are now transferred to Mary.

The expression "highly favored" or "full of grace" is a special title indicating that Mary was especially favored by God. More than Ruth (2:2, 10, 13) or Esther (2:9, 15, 17; 5:2) or the woman in the book of Proverbs (5:19; 7:5; 18:22; Song 8:10), Mary is filled with the special favor of God.

We might mention that Bl. Pope John Paul II had used the expression "joyful" instead of "hail" as he begins the "Ave." The greeting includes a

sense of joy that is missing in the simple word “hail.” Here, as in most of the Scriptures, there is more to the message than just the words.

PURPOSE: Between heaven and earth there seems to be an enormous chasm. God chooses to bridge that chasm in a truly marvelous way.

SUMMARY: Scripture scholars tell us that when the gospels were being written, they probably started at the end and worked to the beginning. That is, the original gospel story told of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and then it was expanded to give us an account of his public life. Last to be written down were the infancy narratives filled with details.

MUSINGS:

1. It would be a good guess to say that the church celebrated the birth of the Lord with the Christmas celebrations and then, as they reflected on this mystery, they added this feast of “the Annunciation of the angel to Mary.”

2. Our reading from Isaiah today is famous for its prediction that “a virgin shall conceive.” Perhaps even more important in this prophecy is the name that was to be given to the child, Immanuel, *God with us*. “God with us” is the most fundamental mystery that we celebrate with this feast.

3. Early in St. John’s gospel, he tells us that “the Word became flesh / and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). Some older folks remember it was read as the “last gospel,” and we were instructed to genuflect. Now, each Sunday as we recite the Creed we bow at the words “was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.” The work of salvation begins with this moment.

4. In the church calendar, the feast of the Annunciation of the Lord is celebrated each year on March 25th. The church also celebrates this event on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, when we use the same reading as we have in this collection.

5. The larger implications of Mary’s response to the angel were summarized succinctly at the Second Vatican Council: “The Virgin Mary, who at the message of the angel received the Word of God in her heart and in her body and brought forth life to the world, is acknowledged and honored as truly the mother of God and of the Redeemer” (*Lumen Gentium* 53).

RELATION TO THE EUCHARIST: As we prepare to celebrate the Eucharist, we begin with the realization that it was here, at the Annunciation, that the Word was first made flesh, the very flesh we will receive in Communion.

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Isaiah: *Guide for the Christian Assembly: A Background Book of the Mass*, 9 vols., ed. Thierry Maertens and Jean Frisque (Notre Dame, IN: Fides Publishers, 1971), I:130.

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3. THE VISITATION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

Exegesis of the First Reading: Zephaniah 3:14-18a

The Lord, the King of Israel, is among you.

The prophet Zephaniah very likely lived in Jerusalem. In general, he was a very pessimistic person. He saw the great corruption internally as people neglected their responsibilities. At the same time the kingdom of Assyria is attacking Jerusalem. The Day of Judgment is upon Judah. Still, in the midst of the gloom and doom, there is hope. There is a new king, Josiah. For Zephaniah this is cause for rejoicing. In fact, all Jerusalem is to rejoice; they are to sing and dance. Zephaniah uses the word “rejoice” repeatedly.

The contrast between the gloom of the present and the joy of the future is the real message of this passage.

Exegesis of the Alternate First Reading: Song of Songs 2:8-14

See, my lover comes leaping across the mountains.

Most Catholic scholars consider the book Song of Songs as a story about two lovers. On a deeper level, however, it is the story of the Lord’s love for his beloved people. This is its deepest meaning and the point of

the whole story. At the same time, the story may also be considered an idealized picture of human love. It delights in the description of young love, so we have the images of the young lover springing across the mountains and hills, peeking through the windows, whispering sweet nothings.

When the lover tells us that the winter is past, he develops the same message that is found in the reading from Zephaniah. There is hope and there is joy.

Later in the book it will speak about the maturity of love and its fidelity that is stronger than death.

Exegesis of the Gospel Reading: Luke 1:39-56

Why should I be honored with a visit from the mother of my Lord?

For this gospel passage we must use the term “midrash” again. It is a Hebrew expression about the various levels of meaning in a story or event. As this story unfolds it uncovers the meaning of many other passages of Scripture as well. In this passage we find many examples of symbolism in the transfer of the ark of the covenant. It is St. Luke’s purpose to show us that Jesus is indeed the Messiah whom Malachi and Daniel had foretold in their prophecies. This passage reflects their prophecies and themes. The Messiah was to journey to Jerusalem and to the temple. Mary’s own journey is the first stage on that journey.

When the ark of the covenant was transferred to Jerusalem, it was accompanied with displays of great joy, singing and dancing. The ark was the sign of the presence of God among his people. Now Mary is that ark; she is the sign who carries the true presence of God in our midst.

Mary will stay in the house of Zechariah and will be a source of blessing to that house. Elizabeth’s words will echo those of King David himself. And Elizabeth’s words reflect those of Deborah (Judg 5:2-31) and Judith (Jdt 13:17-18; 15:9-10) as they announced their victories over evil with the help of the Lord.

In the *Magnificat*, Luke continues his comparison between Mary and Israel. Throughout, he puts the words of the psalms and the liturgical hymns of Israel into the mouth of Mary. In a very special way, he relates Mary to the poor. The poor are always a privileged part of the people waiting for the Messiah. Mary is their spokesperson.

In the last part of the *Magnificat*, Mary is identified with Jerusalem, Israel, and the promises made to Abraham, our father in faith. All the hopes and expectations of Israel are found in Mary.

The early Christian community used the vocabulary of the *Magnificat* to express itself. That community also saw itself as the object of the promises made to Abraham, and so the use of the language of gratitude and praise would certainly be the same.

PURPOSE: From the very beginning, being a Christian meant sharing the Good News.

SUMMARY: "Intimate sharing" is the stuff of soap operas and high drama. Here, however, we see the intimate sharing of Mary and Elizabeth is also the stuff of profound theology.

MUSINGS:

1. When people have nothing, no food, no crops, no freedom, when they are completely deprived of everything, they turn to the one unfailing source of help and comfort. They turn to the Lord. The people of Israel were like that. They had suffered persecution, exile, war, and famine. Yet, the Lord would never forget them. They had the temple and the ark. They had the sign of the presence of God among them. So there was hope.

2. As Christians, we find this message of joy, expressed by the prophets, transferred from Jerusalem to Mary. Mary is the one who brings the ark, the sign of the presence of God, to Elizabeth and to the house of Zechariah.

3. While outwardly Elizabeth and Zechariah did not seem to be suffering, all of Palestine was suffering under Roman domination. All were expecting and praying and hoping for the Messiah to come. The gospel of this celebration tells us of that coming. The Messiah comes to Elizabeth, Zechariah, and John the Baptist. There is rejoicing, there is dancing, and we can guess there is singing as well, the *Magnificat*.

4. We sometimes think we have everything, when in fact we have nothing of our own. Whatever we have, we have from the Lord. The Lord comes to us and blesses us and confers on us all the blessings of God's creation. Elizabeth is very direct: Mary is blessed by the Lord.

5. As we celebrate this feast of the Visitation, we remember that it is Mary who brings the Lord to us as she brought the Lord to Elizabeth, Zechariah, and John the Baptist. Mary brings hope.

6. Sometimes people forget the joy and exultation of being young and in love in the springtime. In using the selection from the Song of Songs as we celebrate this Visitation, the church wants us to rejoice with the joy of youth and young love. It is a beautiful thing.

7. As we remember, as we may very well experience again, the joy of being loved, the church reminds us of an even greater love, the love of the Lord for us. It is the love that initiated the incarnation and prompted the journey of Mary to her cousin Elizabeth. How to put it in words? Here the church suggests that we do so by using the words of the Song of Songs.

8. The church uses the gospel account in Advent on December 21 and on the feast of the Visitation on May 31. It is used on the feast of the Assumption and on the feast of the Queenship of Mary, August 22.

RELATION TO THE EUCHARIST: At the visit of Mary, Elizabeth recognized the presence of the Lord. In the company of both, we too attend to the presence of the Lord.

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