

HAIL MARY, HOLY BIBLE



# Hail Mary, Holy Bible

## Sacred Scripture and the Mysteries of the Rosary

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With great affection and appreciation  
this book is dedicated  
to my colleagues at Little Rock Scripture Study:  
Lilly Hess, Susan McCarthy, RDC, Catherine Upchurch,  
and Nancy Lee Walters



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## Preface

One very significant blessing I received in writing this book came when I was writing the chapter on the sorrowful mysteries (chap. 3). It was just before Holy Week. I hadn't made any earth-shattering commitments to reform my life this last Lent. In fact, I've always wanted to rush through Lent and dive into Easter without getting scarred from the burdens of doing penance. But this Lent became different. While researching, reflecting, and writing about Jesus' agony in the garden, the scourging at the pillar, the crowning with thorns, the carrying of the cross, and, finally, the crucifixion, I discovered myself being there in the event. This is what the Jesuits have always praised about Ignatian reflection on Scripture. You don't just think about the words; you let the words construct the reality and draw you in as a witness to the sacred event. My great blessing in this was to take to heart what is so often said in religious circles, "There is no Easter without a Good Friday."

Sometime in the early 70s, when I was an Old Testament major in an evangelical university, a professor warned us that there was always a danger that one could become too familiar with Scripture, that one could become so certain of one's own scholarship that what you wrote, said, and taught about the Bible could squeeze God out of the Bible and end up being all about your own brilliant understanding. Since 2002 I have been blessed to serve as a writer and editor on staff with Little Rock Scripture Study. I am in my sixties and hope to retire before too long, but my years here have meant immersing myself in Scripture. Doing so as part of Little Rock Scripture Study has, I say hopefully, avoided the pitfall that professor warned against.

This is due in large part because of our director, Catherine "Cackie" Upchurch. Under her leadership Little Rock Scripture Study never

forgets that it is a ministry of God's word. It exists because God's faithful have a hunger for God's word. They want to study Scripture with understanding, but they also want and need to be fed spiritually. Cackie has always kept our focus on being a ministry that both informs and nourishes, and if we are to do our jobs, we have to be not just learning, but growing in faith ourselves, continually being washed, as Paul says, by the water of the word (Eph 5:26). We are a small staff and everyone's efforts are essential. Without Lillian Hess, Susan McCarthy, RDC, and Nancy Lee Walters my own job wouldn't get done. I am blessed to have them as colleagues and friends.

On top of everything else, though, I want to thank Cackie Upchurch for her superior skills as an editor, for all the sorry stuff she didn't let me say, and for all the good things she helped me say.

Finally, I want to give thanks to Liturgical Press. They are our partners in publication and everything they do exudes quality and professionalism and they all have my highest personal regard.

# Introduction

Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled.

—Luke 1:45

The closing words of Elizabeth’s greeting to Mary at the visitation call out to us to contemplate the power of God’s word spoken to us. In the pages ahead, we will explore the Sacred Scriptures that recount, or touch on, the four most common mysteries associated with the rosary: the Joyful Mysteries, the Mysteries of Light, the Sorrowful Mysteries, and the Glorious Mysteries.

Before we enter those mysteries, however, it might be best to consider why they are called mysteries. These mysteries are unlike those with which we are probably most familiar. These mysteries are not “whodunits.” Indeed, the mysteries of the rosary are mysteries precisely because we are told who did it. They are mysteries because God is the principal actor, the person who is at the center of the story and yet also the author of the story, the one who sets the plot and brings the story to its fulfillment. God’s presence in these mysteries, felt or unfelt, sought or rejected, is always beyond anyone’s physical senses, thus the mystery of it all.

There is also the mystery that takes place in encountering Sacred Scripture. The Scriptures associated with the rosary do more than just recount sacred stories. They are the word of God, which is always a living word, a word intended and directed to transform our lives. There is no more powerful way to pray the rosary than to pray it while hearing and speaking Sacred Scripture as part of our prayerful contemplation.

## 2 *Hail Mary, Holy Bible*

The prophet referred to by scholars as Third Isaiah proclaimed God's word to the people of Judah at a time when they were struggling to find hope in God's promises, uncertain as to whether they would ever be fulfilled:

“[J]ust as from the heavens  
the rain and snow come down  
And do not return there  
till they have watered the earth,  
making it fertile and fruitful,  
Giving seed to the one who sows  
and bread to the one who eats,  
So shall my word be  
that goes forth from my mouth;  
It shall not return to me empty,  
but shall do what pleases me,  
achieving the end for which I sent it. (Isa 55:10-11)

The word of God, planted as a seed within human hearts, may wait not just years, or decades, but even generations before bearing fruit. A message from a prophet would be heard first in a specific context, at a specific time, in a specific place. In order to help us understand a prophet's message, those scholars responsible for interpreting Scripture do a lot of research into the time, place, and situation of those who first received the prophet's message. But messages don't just lay dormant once uttered, especially prophetic messages. Once people hear a message from someone they believe to be a prophet of God, they will keep the message alive and carry it with them. With both heart and mind they will ponder it, wondering always if they have fully understood it. This is true especially for a message of hope. Most of the time, most people live in hope of something better.

The children of Abraham were people of hope, but also people who had had their hopes dashed many times and yet never failed to trust in the words of hope planted in their hearts by the prophets. When the word of God takes root in the human heart, the word itself takes on a new context; it grows and flourishes in a new time and is carried into new places and new situations. Elizabeth and her kinswoman Mary met each other, greeted each other, swept up in that prophetic hope, in the ultimate hope, of a Messiah who would fulfill all the divine promises to Israel.

In praying the rosary while opening our hearts and minds to the word of God we inevitably encounter God incarnate in Christ Jesus. We also encounter Mary. Mary is the great role model for all Christians because of her response to the word of God. Mary is blessed because she believes that the word of the Lord spoken to her will be fulfilled even when it takes her life in directions she never contemplated. There is no doubting that God had a plan for her life; she was chosen to bear the Son of God. Could she possibly have imagined how her people, Israel, would respond to her son with both joyous acceptance and vile rejection? Their response to Jesus would have dire implications for her own life. It would eventually be a sword that would pierce her heart (Luke 2:35). Mary's example to us, however, is that she took all these things and reflected on them in her heart (Luke 2:19, 51).

One stunning image of Mary that grew over time was to see her as a new burning bush. When God first revealed himself to Moses, he did so by speaking to him from a bush at the foot of Mount Horeb (Sinai). The bush was brilliantly aflame and yet the fire did not consume it, allowing the bush, a created thing, to be something through which the Creator could reveal himself. Knowing that the eternal Word of God became incarnate in the womb of the Virgin Mary led early mystical theologians into understanding that Mary, throughout her pregnancy, was very much like the burning bush, a creature in whom the uncontainable God was contained, yet without being consumed. For centuries now, one of the focal icons in St. Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai, Egypt, is an icon of Mary as the burning bush.

I offer this commentary on the Sacred Scriptures associated with the mysteries of the rosary as an invitation to imitate Mary in taking the Word of God to heart, pondering it deeply, carrying it into our own circumstances, and allowing it to set our own hearts aflame, to ultimately allowing us to be witnesses to the world of God's merciful presence.



## CHAPTER I

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# *The Joyful Mysteries*

## THE FIRST JOYFUL MYSTERY

### The Annunciation

*Luke 1:26-38*

<sup>26</sup>In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup>to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup>And coming to her, he said, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you." <sup>29</sup>But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup>Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup>Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup>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, <sup>33</sup>and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." <sup>34</sup>But Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" <sup>35</sup>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. <sup>36</sup>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; <sup>37</sup>for nothing will be impossible for God." <sup>38</sup>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.

Hidden in Luke's straightforward reporting of the angel Gabriel's dutiful delivery of his special message to Mary is the stark contrast between the messenger and the recipient. Gabriel is not simply sent *by* God, but he is sent *from* God. This is the Gabriel who revealed himself to Zechariah in announcing the birth of John the Baptist. Gabriel's home in the universe is the immediate presence of God (Luke 1:19), and yet God sends this most privileged of beings to a tiny village (archaeological data suggests a population of under 150) to address a message to a young woman, who, having not yet married, has virtually no status even in this remote village of Israel—a foreign-occupied land that has lost status as a nation in its own right. With utter simplicity and brevity Luke leads us to this most unassuming stage for a message proclaiming the most important event since the creation of the universe.

Gabriel's salutation of the young, seemingly insignificant Mary elevates her status beyond anything she could possibly comprehend at the time. Thousands of years later, faithful believers around the world will prayerfully repeat Gabriel's greeting, sometimes in joy, at others in sorrow, praying also for enlightenment or hoping for a share in glory: "Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women."

Mary was greatly troubled by the greeting and pondered its nature (1:28). In Judges 13:2-5, an angel of the Lord's appearance is described as that of a fearsome man. Not only would Mary be frightened, but her humility might even have made her suspicious: Why would this person, whoever or whatever it is, announce its presence by proclaiming that she is favored? Had anything in her life previous to this indicated that she was favored? And if she recognized this presence as a heavenly being, wouldn't it make his claim all the more baffling?

This tells us what a skillful writer Luke is, for in such very few words he leads us to understand that Mary is already unsettled by the greeting. How can she possibly be able to simply accept what the angel is going to tell her next? But Luke has also introduced us to a characteristic of Mary that he will continue to emphasize. Mary ponders Gabriel's greeting and Mary will continue to ponder throughout her life because of the events that will follow like aftershocks from the earthquake initiated in the angel's greeting.

The angel knows he has frightened her, and tells her not to be afraid. This is one of the most common phrases of reassurance found in the Bible. Because the reassurance is so common, we can be fairly certain that being frightened is the most common response to an encounter with

the divine. Gabriel also gives her a specific reason for not being afraid. Having first hailed her as being favored, he now tells her the source of her favor: “[Y]ou have found favor with God” (1:30).

But nothing could be more baffling than how God proposes to show favor to Mary. She is to become pregnant and to bear a son she is to name Jesus, which means “Yah saves” (Yah is a shortened version of Yahweh, the name for God revealed to Moses through the burning bush [Exod 3:14-15]). Gabriel then quickly explains how great a favor this is by informing her of how great this son of hers will be. He will be called “God’s Son” and he will inherit the throne of his ancestor David, but under her child’s rule the kingdom will last forever.

Mary was probably among those Jews awaiting a messiah who would bring about the prophetic promises made concerning the royal house of David. The prophet Nathan assured David, “Your house and your kingdom are firm forever before me; your throne shall be firmly established forever” (2 Sam 7:16). Walter Brueggemann, one of the most prominent Old Testament scholars of our time, informs us that the subsequent kings of Judah, as descendants of David, foolishly used this divine promise of unwavering loyalty to assure themselves that they could manage their realm without regard for justice or faithfulness.

The royal line of David never had an heir to reign as king after the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 587 BC. This left those who had faith in the prophetic promises to reassess what the promise meant. While they were in exile in Babylon, God instilled a new hope in the people through the prophet Ezekiel: “Say to them: Thus says the Lord GOD: I will soon take the Israelites from among the nations to which they have gone and gather them from all around to bring them back to their land. . . . They shall live on the land I gave to Jacob my servant, the land where their ancestors lived; they shall live on it always, they, their children, and their children’s children, with David my servant as their prince forever” (Ezek 37:21, 25).

When Gabriel appeared to the Virgin Mary, the people had waited nearly six hundred years for a fulfillment of any prophecy concerning the reestablishment of the house of David providing a king over God’s people. That the angel is identified as Gabriel is significant in this respect as well. Gabriel is the angel that reveals a vision of the messianic age to Daniel (Dan 8:16-17).

Being told that she will bring the Messiah into the world would seem to be the most startling thing any Jewish woman of the time could

possibly hear, but however amazed Mary might be at the prospect, she has reason to wonder even more at its possibility. "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" she asks (1:34).

Long before Luke or Matthew provided accounts of Mary's virginal conception of Jesus, Paul made the first known mention of Jesus' birth in his letter to the Galatians (4:4-5): "[W]hen the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption." Paul makes no mention of Mary by name or any reference to her virginity. It is interesting that Paul makes no claim concerning Jesus' father, but it still raises the question, Why was Luke careful to inform his readers (literally "Theophilus," see 1:1-3) that Jesus was conceived through a virgin?

Luke's reasoning is found in Gabriel's response to Mary's question ("How can this be"): "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." Jesus is not just the Son of God by adoption, but he literally had God as his father. But the matter of adoption is still important—the matter of our adoption. Jesus uniquely has God as his father, but he is also our brother and not just because he shares our human nature. Jesus has brought about our adoption as sons of the same father: we too have God as our father.

John tells us of Jesus' unique relationship with God by stressing that the eternal Word of the Father became one of us, fully human, in Jesus Christ. And his coming among us as one of us brings to us the possibility of being reborn as daughters and sons of God:

He came to what was his own,  
but his own people did not accept him.  
But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children  
of God, to those who believe in his name, who were born not by  
natural generation nor by human choice nor by a man's decision but  
of God. (John 1:11-13)

John does not use the word adoption, perhaps because he wants us to understand that our acceptance of Jesus, our belief "in his name," has made us children of God in the fullest possible sense. We are born again as children of God. His description of how that birth comes about is very much what Luke (and Matthew) tells us in proclaiming Mary's virginal conception and the birth of Jesus: he was born, "not by natural generation nor by human choice nor by a man's decision but of God."

We should be as astonished and bewildered by John's message to us as Mary was of Gabriel's.

Gabriel offers Mary a sign to authenticate what he has told her. Her kinswoman, Elizabeth, is also to have a child, she who, like Sarah long before her, is far too old to bear a child. Learning this, Mary believes and accepts her role in salvation history—"May it be done to me according to your word"—a role that will leave her constantly pondering, what can this mean?

## THE SECOND JOYFUL MYSTERY

### The Visitation

*Luke 1:36-37, 39-56*

<sup>36</sup>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; <sup>37</sup>for nothing will be impossible for God." . . . <sup>39</sup>During those days Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, <sup>40</sup>where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup>When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the holy Spirit, <sup>42</sup>cried out in a loud voice and said, "Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup>And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? <sup>44</sup>For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup>Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled."

<sup>46</sup>And Mary said:

"My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;

<sup>47</sup>my spirit rejoices in God my savior.

<sup>48</sup>For he has looked upon his handmaid's lowliness;  
behold, from now on will all ages call me blessed.

<sup>49</sup>The Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.

<sup>50</sup>His mercy is from age to age  
to those who fear him.

<sup>51</sup>He has shown might with his arm,  
dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart.

<sup>52</sup>He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones  
but lifted up the lowly.

<sup>53</sup>The hungry he has filled with good things;  
the rich he has sent away empty.

<sup>54</sup>He has helped Israel his servant,  
remembering his mercy,

<sup>55</sup>according to his promise to our fathers,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

<sup>56</sup>Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

Mary was given a sign. When she asked the angel Gabriel how it could be that she would bear a son as a virgin, he told her that her relative, Elizabeth, had conceived in her old age. If that could be true, then truly her own pregnancy as a virgin was not a thing too difficult for God.

And so Mary set out in haste. But the reasons for her haste were not simply to verify the angel’s words. If she were just wondering if the angel’s words were true—if it could really be possible that Elizabeth, in her old age, had actually become pregnant—she might have simply waited around until the news reached her at home in Nazareth. The news would be momentous and would certainly reach her in time. Tradition holds that Elizabeth and Zechariah lived in a small village five miles outside of Jerusalem, known as Ein Karem (English spellings vary). From Mary’s home in Nazareth to Ein Karem it was a distance of just under ninety miles. It would have been quite a journey, lasting several days, if not a week, on foot. That Mary set out in haste better demonstrates her enthusiasm at learning of Elizabeth’s pregnancy than it would a desire to verify the angel’s words. Making haste in such a journey reveals Mary’s determination and purposefulness. Haste, in this case, does not suggest she set out unprepared or on a whim. She was a very young Jewish woman in an extremely patriarchal culture. Her pregnancy probably occurred near her transition from girl to woman and she would not, could not, set out on such a journey on her own. She would have to be chaperoned by an adult male relative, and that would require a family discussion at the very least, but Luke tells us nothing about that. Such details lie outside Luke’s purpose in describing Mary’s visitation of Elizabeth.

It is important for Luke to provide the warm details of the visitation, including Elizabeth’s greeting, the joyful response of John within her womb, and Mary’s ecstatic prayer (the *Magnificat*), because they all point to Jesus’ unparalleled stature. As great as John the Baptist will be, his

role in salvation history is to point the way to Christ. This is the message Luke intends to convey in proclaiming this marvelous event to us.

Upon entering “the house of Zechariah” Mary greeted Elizabeth and a great rejoicing occurs. Elizabeth, six months pregnant with John, knows immediately that Mary too is expecting a child. She knows because even in the womb John cannot withhold his joy at being in the presence of the one to whom he will bear witness in the ultimate fulfillment of his own prophetic calling. Mary, Elizabeth, and John are three people whom Christians will count as the most privileged people on earth at this point, for they and they alone know whose presence they are in, but their exultation springs from their humility.

“[H]ow does this happen to me,” asks Elizabeth, “that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” And Mary’s answer to that question is equally humble. “[M]y spirit rejoices in God my savior. / For he has looked upon his handmaid’s lowliness.” When Mary proclaims, “behold, from now on will all ages call me blessed,” she does so in all humility:

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;  
my spirit rejoices in God my savior.  
For he has looked upon his handmaid’s lowliness.”

In looking upon his handmaid’s lowliness, God has forever exalted her: “behold, from now on will all ages call me blessed.”

The first to call her blessed was Elizabeth: “Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” Elizabeth’s blessing is, of course, at the heart of the prayer we know as “the Hail Mary.” This makes Elizabeth’s original blessing of Mary the source of those countless blessings fulfilling Mary’s prophetic claim that “from now on will all ages call me blessed.”

The *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55) is proclaimed only during the Liturgy of the Word during Mass on August 15 (solemnity of the Assumption) and on December 22 (except when that is the 4th Sunday of Advent). In the Liturgy of the Hours—the official prayer of the church and the duty of all ordained and vowed religious—evening prayer always includes the *Magnificat*. As a literary form it is called a canticle. In the Bible a canticle is a hymn of praise found outside the book of Psalms. There are many in the Old Testament. The first one is found in Exodus and is commonly called the Song of Moses (Exod 15:1-9). Many scholars consider it one of the oldest texts found in the Bible.

The *Magnificat* is most similar to the Prayer of Hannah (1 Sam 2:1-10). The similarity between Hannah's canticle and the *Magnificat* is more than just in their content. The similarity between the two is felt even more in their context. Hannah, Mary, and Elizabeth are all associated with the birth of sons that came into the world only through God's miraculous intervention.

Hannah was the mother of the prophet Samuel, who would anoint the first two kings of Israel, Saul and David. Hannah was one of two wives of a Levitical priest named Elkanah. His other wife bore children and Hannah had borne none, but while praying in desperation she promised the Lord that if she were to bear a son, she would surrender him, after he was weaned, to a lifetime of dedicated service to God as a Nazarite—those who, like John the Baptist, refused all alcoholic beverages and never cut their hair.

In their canticles, both Hannah and Mary rejoice in God's merciful interventions, interventions that bring about great reversals in human affairs. For Luke this is captured in Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God. Jesus makes God's reign visible and present through his teaching, healing, and forgiving, bringing about a merciful reversal in typical human affairs, which always favor the powerful over the weak. Notice the reversals that Hannah praises God for bringing about in her canticle:

"The bows of the mighty are broken,  
while the tottering gird on strength.  
The well-fed hire themselves out for bread,  
while the hungry no longer have to toil.  
The barren wife bears seven sons,  
while the mother of many languishes." (1 Sam 2:4-5)

Hannah proclaims the power of God to reverse the historical trends that favor those who take and ignore only the needs of the poor, the humble, and the meek. Her proclamation is mirrored in the *Magnificat*:

"He has shown might with his arm,  
dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart.  
He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones  
but lifted up the lowly.  
The hungry he has filled with good things;  
the rich he has sent away empty." (Luke 1:51-53)

Canticles and psalms are a rich core tradition in biblical literature. They are such an integral part of Israel's prayer life that it should come

as no surprise that biblical scholars are mostly agreed that the *Magnificat* may not have originated with Mary. It is quite likely to have been handed down in one or more versions from both Jewish and Christian sources. Luke would have set it down in writing because it ideally reflected Mary's spirituality. If she did not pray it verbatim, she certainly prayed it in essence.

At the heart of the visitation is a universal human story that proclaims the joy of kinship, the welcoming of new life—even in seemingly impossible circumstances—and the hopeful prayer that the joys and bounty of life can be shared by everyone and not just the rich and powerful.

In telling the story of the visitation, Luke reveals that he had a very specific theological purpose in the way he presented it. Its universal themes do not detract from his purpose. Instead, they help him fulfill his purpose. The humble of the earth, like these two humble women, help Luke to proclaim a truth essential to his gospel: John the Baptist's role in salvation history was to humble himself by bearing witness to the one who was greater than he. And Mary too, though she was to be called blessed throughout all time, received her blessing because of the child she was carrying in her womb.

## THE THIRD JOYFUL MYSTERY

### The Nativity

*Luke 2:1-20*

<sup>1</sup>In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled. <sup>2</sup>This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup>So all went to be enrolled, each to his own town. <sup>4</sup>And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, <sup>5</sup>to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. <sup>6</sup>While they were there, the time came for her to have her child, <sup>7</sup>and she gave birth to her first-born son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

<sup>8</sup>Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock. <sup>9</sup>The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear. <sup>10</sup>The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that

will be for all the people. <sup>11</sup>For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord. <sup>12</sup>And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.” <sup>13</sup>And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying:

<sup>14</sup>“Glory to God in the highest  
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

<sup>15</sup>When the angels went away from them to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go, then, to Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” <sup>16</sup>So they went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup>When they saw this, they made known the message that had been told them about this child. <sup>18</sup>All who heard it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds. <sup>19</sup>And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart. <sup>20</sup>Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them.

Only Matthew and Luke give us accounts of Jesus’ nativity. Because of the rosary’s intimate association with Mary, because Matthew’s nativity account is more concerned with Joseph than with Mary, it is Luke’s account that provides the basis for this scriptural examination of the third joyful mystery of the rosary. Nevertheless, because “the Christmas story” we are told and sing about from childhood is usually an amalgam of the two accounts, there is good reason to provide a table that outlines both the parallels and contrasts between Matthew and Luke’s separate accounts of both the annunciation and nativity (see appendix).

Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph were required to travel to Bethlehem from Nazareth because Joseph had to register there as a member of the tribe of Judah during the reign of the Roman Emperor Augustus, while Quirinius was governor of Syria. Biblical scholars and historians note that there seems to be no evidence of a Roman census at that time.

To get past this problem, let’s consider an important theological truth Luke’s assertion makes. At the very least, we have to assume that Luke is attempting to show that the birth of Jesus Christ is of great historical consequence. From Luke’s perspective, placing the birth of Christ in a time and place firmly under the control of the Roman Empire and its toadies is a way of demonstrating how God’s activity in the world upstages any show of power or authority that earthly rulers can exert. The birth of Jesus, the one of whom Gabriel told Mary “he will rule over the

house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (1:33), occurs without any sign of earthly pomp or celebration. He is born in a stable and placed in a manger because the world had no room for him. When Caesar Augustus took his throne, it was acclaimed as "good news," throughout the empire. The Good News of the salvation Jesus will bring to the world will be acclaimed long after Augustus dies; it will be spread with signs and wonders "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The humble nature of Jesus' birth and its incredible importance to the world is a pointed example of the theme of the great reversal found in the previous comparison of Hannah's prayer with the *Magnificat*.

Both Matthew and Luke are in agreement that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Bethlehem was the birthplace of King David. Because of the prophetic promises made to David and his heirs ("Your house and your kingdom are firm forever before me; your throne shall be firmly established forever [2 Sam 7:16]), the hope for an ultimate heir to David's line was expected to come to power out of Bethlehem:

But you, Bethlehem-Ephrathah  
least among the clans of Judah,  
From you shall come forth for me  
one who is to be ruler in Israel;  
Whose origin is from of old,  
from ancient times. (Mic 5:1)

In announcing that Mary gave birth to her firstborn son (Luke 2:7), Luke isn't hinting that the Virgin Mary would have other children. He is, rather, preparing us for our next encounter with Christ in his gospel, which is also the next joyful mystery of the rosary: the presentation of the baby Jesus in the temple.

The angel of the Lord appears to some shepherds of the region. Earlier, Gabriel was identified as the angel of the Lord, but that doesn't mean there is only one angel of the Lord. As in Old Testament times, the distinction between the angel of the Lord and God is not always razor sharp, for along with the appearance of the angel the shepherds also witness "the glory of the Lord," which strikes great fear in them (2:8-9). Scripture is consistent in presenting us with the divine response to fear in the presence of the Almighty: "Do not be afraid."

The particular reason the angel gives for calming their fears is an early proclamation of the gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ: A savior is born to us, a gift of great joy for all the people. The news is so wondrous

that all the denizens of heaven, “the heavenly host,” make their praise of God in the presence of the shepherds. Their words are embedded in the Gloria at the opening of the eucharistic liturgy, which is its own highest order of praise for God:

“Glory to God in the highest  
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

While the appearance of the angelic host to the shepherds includes a clear proclamation of the Gospel, Luke’s use of them should remind Christians of all succeeding generations that the Gospel belongs in a special way to the poor. When Jesus is born, only shepherds are told of his birth and only the shepherds seek him out. Shepherds were regarded as lowliest of the lowly in Israelite society. When shepherding was part of a family responsibility, rather than the job of hirelings, it was a job for the youngest in the family. As the youngest in his family, David had to be fetched from his shepherding duties when Samuel came looking for someone in Jesse’s family to anoint as king (1 Sam 16:1-13). When it was a job for hirelings, it was a job given to young children, quite often girls.

In Matthew’s account of the nativity, those who visit the newborn king may themselves be royalty, but at the very least, the magi are wealthy sages who are able to gain an audience with King Herod. In this way, and also with the gift of gold the magi bring, Matthew emphasizes Jesus’ royalty. Luke truly regards Jesus as the Messiah, who is the promised king in the line of David, but in informing us of the divine proclamation of the Gospel to the shepherds, Luke once again tells us that Jesus has come to upset the old world order. The Gospel will raise up the poor and cast down the mighty.

Unlike the magi in Matthew’s gospel, the shepherds are not given a star to lead them to the newborn Savior. They have only the angel’s announcement that this Savior is lying in a manger somewhere in nearby Bethlehem, bundled inside a snug wrap. There were probably more than a few stables and mangers in Bethlehem. Any household of the time that could afford animals would typically have a stable on the ground floor of their house. The shepherds weren’t told to look for an “inn,” probably because the Greek term used for the traditional rendering as an “inn” more correctly simply refers to a guest room in a house. But inspiration can lead from within, and we know that the shepherds found them and told Mary and Joseph how the angels had announced the Good News and location of Jesus’ birth (2:17).

Luke concludes his account of Jesus' birth by giving two examples of discipleship for us to emulate. The shepherds, unrestrained in their joy at finding Mary and Joseph, and the infant in the manger, just as the angel had told them, tell everyone about the message they were given about the child. Luke has cleverly worded this. It is not specifically the news that they had found the child that they report with joy; rather it is "the message that had been told them about this child" (2:17, emphasis added). The message is the Gospel, the Good News about the Christ. The shepherds, like all those who will later be touched by Jesus in some way, become evangelists, and Luke sets them up to be examples for us.

The second example of discipleship that Luke gives us is the infant's mother, Mary. Upon hearing the shepherds speak of the angel's message, "Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart." It is neither the first nor the last time Luke will tell of Mary's reflective nature (1:29; 2:19; 2:51). We are like Mary when we take God's word to heart, pondering what it can mean for us as disciples.

## THE FOURTH JOYFUL MYSTERY

### The Presentation

*Luke 2:21-38*

<sup>21</sup>When eight days were completed for his circumcision, he was named Jesus, the name given him by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

<sup>22</sup>When the days were completed for their purification according to the law of Moses, they took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, <sup>23</sup>just as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every male that opens the womb shall be consecrated to the Lord," <sup>24</sup>and to offer the sacrifice of "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons," in accordance with the dictate in the law of the Lord.

<sup>25</sup>Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, awaiting the consolation of Israel, and the holy Spirit was upon him. <sup>26</sup>It had been revealed to him by the holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Messiah of the Lord. <sup>27</sup>He came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to perform the custom of the law in regard to him, <sup>28</sup>he took him into his arms and blessed God, saying:

<sup>29</sup>"Now, Master, you may let your servant go  
in peace, according to your word,

<sup>30</sup>for my eyes have seen your salvation,  
<sup>31</sup>which you prepared in sight of all the peoples,  
<sup>32</sup>a light for revelation to the Gentiles,  
and glory for your people Israel.”

<sup>33</sup>The child’s father and mother were amazed at what was said about him; <sup>34</sup>and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted <sup>35</sup>(and you yourself a sword will pierce) so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.” <sup>36</sup>There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived seven years with her husband after her marriage, <sup>37</sup>and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple, but worshiped night and day with fasting and prayer. <sup>38</sup>And coming forward at that very time, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem.

When Luke wrote his gospel sometime after the Romans destroyed the Jewish temple in AD 70, Jewish religious authorities no longer recognized as Jews those who professed Jesus as their Messiah. Gentile believers already far outnumbered Jewish adherents to the messianic movement that was once called “the Way” (Acts 9:2; 18:25-26), and both were beginning to be grouped together as “Christians.” A new religion had emerged out of Judaism. This posed a problem for Luke concerning God’s faithfulness. From within his gospel and the book of Acts (which he also wrote) it is evident that he was determined to answer Gentiles who criticized Christian belief in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah on the grounds that Jesus had been rejected as the Messiah by his own people. Some critics of early Christianity appear to have suggested that the Christian God was fickle, abandoning one set of people to join himself to another.

Luke began his gospel by assuring his audience, whom he referred to as “Theophilus” (who might have been a theoretical figure representing an entire Christian community), that because of Luke’s careful research he might “realize the certainty of the teachings” regarding Jesus that Theophilus had already received (see 1:1-4). Luke wanted to affirm that regardless of how few Jews were presently followers of Christ, from the very beginning of his life, Jesus had been received with great joy by devout Jews, and that Jesus himself had been raised in a holy and devout Jewish family who faithfully adhered to Jewish religious practices.

Luke's second book, Acts, records how the early church leaders, meeting in Jerusalem, resolved the first major crisis that threatened to split the church in two. Paul and others were admitting uncircumcised Gentiles to baptism and full membership in the Christian faith. Many other early Christian missionaries, both Jewish and Gentile, insisted that male circumcision was a required sign of anyone who claimed to be part of the messianic people. In Acts, Luke describes how the early church, inspired by the Holy Spirit, came to the conclusion that circumcision was not a requirement for Gentile Christians (Acts 15:1-29).

Luke, however, found it necessary in his gospel to demonstrate Jesus' own fidelity to the covenant God had made with the Jewish people. In their care of Jesus, Joseph and Mary were scrupulously faithful to the covenant God had made with Abraham and Moses and so they had Jesus circumcised eight days after his birth (see Lev 12:3).

Perhaps because Luke was writing for a Gentile audience, what Luke tells us about the presentation of the Lord does not tightly mirror what someone fully aware of Jewish practice during Jesus' lifetime would expect. First of all, it was not necessary to present a firstborn son at the temple. But that they did so at the temple underscores Joseph and Mary's devotion to the temple.

Luke also seems to suggest that both Joseph and Mary waited the required time (forty days) for their mutual purification before going to the temple: "When the days were completed for their purification according to the law of Moses, they took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord" (2:22). According to Jewish law concerning a firstborn son only the mother was required to wait forty days before entering the temple area. What Luke tells us, however, is that they all, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus, went together to the temple to present Jesus to the Lord.

At the heart of the presentation of a firstborn male to Israel's God is a sacrifice that "redeems" the child. On the night of the exodus, when all the firstborn males of Egypt were taken by the Lord, the firstborn males of the Hebrews were spared because the blood of their Passover lambs had been sprinkled on their doorposts (Exod 12:21-27). The first commandment God gives Moses following the Passover is the requirement that all firstborn males be consecrated to the Lord (Exod 13:1). This meant that once consecrated to the Lord they belonged completely to God, and in order for the family to receive the child back into their care, the child had to be "redeemed" by offering a sacrifice.

There are only two types of animals that can be sacrificed for the child's redemption: those who can afford it must offer a lamb. The poor can offer birds—either two turtledoves or two pigeons (Lev 12:2-8). Once again we are reminded that Mary and Joseph are poor, members of the *anawim*, the most humble class in Israel. Yet, in their humble state, their righteousness and faithfulness shine forth.

With Simeon and Anna's encounters with the infant Jesus, our attention is drawn even closer to Luke's concern to show us that there were those faithful Israelites who, led by the Holy Spirit, recognized Jesus as the Messiah. Simeon, an old man who has spent his life hoping to see the fulfillment of God's promises to bring peace and comfort to Israel, praises God for revealing the answer to his greatest desire in life in the infant Jesus. But Simeon also sees that Jesus will bring about not only consolation for Israel, but discord as well. He warns Mary, "[T]his child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted" (2:34).

Simeon then tells Mary, almost as an aside, that controversy over Jesus will prove to rend her own heart in a near fatal manner: "[A]nd you yourself a sword will pierce" (2:35a). This is prophecy, of course, but not one to be understood literally. There is no account in Luke or any of our gospels that indicate that the crucified body of Jesus was ever placed in the arms of his mother, but Michelangelo's deeply moving *Pietà* surely expresses the pain of the metaphorical sword that Simeon promised would pierce her.

Simeon goes on to tell Mary that a reason for Jesus being a sign of contradiction in Israel is "so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed" (2:35b). Who we are in truth can be revealed by how we respond to Jesus and his teachings. Later in Luke, the adult Jesus will tell his followers much the same thing: "Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. From now on a household of five will be divided, three against two and two against three" (12:51-52). Matthew marks the point even more sharply: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace upon the earth. I have come to bring not peace but the sword" (10:34).

While Simeon is not called a prophet, he does prophesy concerning Jesus' destiny. The elderly Anna, on the other hand, is designated as a prophet(ess), yet the apparent prophecy she receives is not revealed, except to say that she, too, somehow recognizes who Jesus is, gives thanks to God, and then proclaims what could be called an early stage

of the Gospel that Luke is proclaiming “to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem” (2:38).

We should not miss the importance to Luke’s narrative that both Simeon and Anna are elderly and noted for their devotion to God. Simeon is “righteous and devout,” while Anna “never left the temple, but worshiped night and day with fasting and prayer.” Their old age reminds us that there were those in Israel who had been hoping for the Messiah for a long time, and for those who could recognize in the infant that God had begun to fulfill the ancient promises to Israel, Jesus was already peace and consolation. Controversy over Jesus would create a storm from the moment Jesus took up his ministry to Israel, but for those who can see by faith who Jesus is, he is not only peace and consolation, but also the crowning joy of a fulfilled life.

## **THE FIFTH JOYFUL MYSTERY**

### **Finding the Young Jesus in the Temple**

*Luke 2:39-52*

<sup>39</sup>When they had fulfilled all the prescriptions of the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. <sup>40</sup>The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

<sup>41</sup>Each year his parents went to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover, <sup>42</sup>and when he was twelve years old, they went up according to festival custom. <sup>43</sup>After they had completed its days, as they were returning, the boy Jesus remained behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. <sup>44</sup>Thinking that he was in the caravan, they journeyed for a day and looked for him among their relatives and acquaintances, <sup>45</sup>but not finding him, they returned to Jerusalem to look for him. <sup>46</sup>After three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions, <sup>47</sup>and all who heard him were astounded at his understanding and his answers. <sup>48</sup>When his parents saw him, they were astonished, and his mother said to him, “Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety.” <sup>49</sup>And he said to them, “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” <sup>50</sup>But they did not understand what he said to them. <sup>51</sup>He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them; and his mother kept all these things in her heart. <sup>52</sup>And Jesus advanced [in] wisdom and age and favor before God and man.

If it were not for Luke's account of Joseph and Mary finding the twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple, we would know nothing of what Jesus did or said as a child. At twelve, he is just on the verge of being considered a man. In later times, Jewish boys would make the transition from childhood to adulthood at thirteen through the ritual of becoming a "son of the law" (*bar mitzvah*). This was the age at which Jewish boys become accountable before God for their own actions (for girls, it is twelve).

Some have speculated that Luke's account of the finding in the temple actually describes Jesus' *bar mitzvah*, but we simply don't know if or when or how the equivalent of a *bar mitzvah* was celebrated in Jesus' day. According to noted Lukan scholar Joseph Fitzmyer, however, this scene does reveal what, in later Judaism, a *bar mitzvah* is supposed to demonstrate concerning a Jewish male who is entering the religious and moral responsibilities of adulthood. In being questioned by religious authorities in the temple, Jesus demonstrates that he is fully trained in the Torah and capable of fulfilling all the adult obligations of a faithful Jew.

Luke tells us that Joseph and Mary returned to Nazareth after the presentation in the temple. Of the twelve years between the time of their return and the finding of Jesus in the temple, we are told only that "[t]he child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him" (2:40). This is important, though, because it tells us that Jesus grew and developed as a child. He enjoyed God's favor, he endeavored to learn what God wanted of him (he was filled with wisdom), and he developed physically. There are no hints of miraculous behavior or knowledge, but only exceptionally good behavior accompanied by the acquisition of wisdom. At this point he does not appear to be all that different from John the Baptist as a child, who "grew and became strong in spirit" (1:80).

We have always idealized the Holy Family. What better parents could there be than Joseph and Mary? Even the setting for this account reminds us that they are faithful servants of God, having dutifully journeyed to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover "according to festival custom" (Luke 2:42, see also Deut 16:2). And yet the adolescent Jesus can stray from their care as they return from a journey to Jerusalem and his disappearance is not noticed for some time. Luke does not suggest there is any fault on their part, however. They were both thinking he was somewhere in the throng of returning pilgrims.

It would have been customary for Jewish pilgrims to travel together, in a "caravan," but probably not in mixed company when in a large

group. The women and children would walk together and the men would accompany each other. And this may be the source of the problem. Is Jesus, at twelve, a young man or a child? Could Mary have thought he was with the men, and Joseph thought he was with the women? All Luke tells us is that they “looked for him among their relatives and acquaintances” (2:44). But that alone is a pleasant thought for reflection. Joseph and Mary and Jesus were not loners. They were sociable. They had friends and relatives and they naturally assumed that Jesus might choose to be in their company.

The more carefully readers recognize that point, the sharper they will feel Luke’s primary message in this unique account concerning the boy/man Jesus. Who does Jesus want to be with, who is his preferred company: friends, relatives, or parents?

Desperate to find him once they realize they have lost him, they return to Jerusalem. It has been three days since they last saw him when they look for him in the temple. When we find the phrase “three days” associated with Jesus in the New Testament, we are probably never wrong in thinking that we are being either reminded of or told of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. Jesus has been lost to his family for three days, but on that third day he is found again.

Mary, his mother, would of course be very relieved. In fact, both Mary and Joseph are astonished, because Jesus is seated with the religious teachers in the temple, and they are exhibiting their own astonishment at both his answers and his understanding. But Luke tells us that Mary has also been put out by Jesus’ behavior. What he has done is no way to treat his family. “[H]is mother said to him, ‘Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety’” (2:48). Jesus answers her question with two of his own, and they are the first words we are told that Jesus ever spoke: “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (2:49).

It is the unstated answers to those questions that tell us why Luke wanted this account to appear in his gospel. In the first part of this account, Luke speaks freely of Mary and Joseph as being Jesus’ parents, and Jesus’ disappearance from their care becomes a great stress on them. When they find him in the temple, Mary once again reminds Jesus of his obligation to his parents, referring to Joseph and herself as “your father and I” (2:48).

Jesus’ answer, his questions—“Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (2:49)—tells them

something very difficult to grasp, that his true Father expects him to be engaged in the family business. "But they did not understand what he said to them" (2:50).

At the annunciation, we learned that the angel Gabriel informed Mary that her son would be called the "Son of the Most High" and "the Son of God" (1:32, 35), but it was not a lack of faith on Mary's part that she would have to struggle with what that meant for her and her relationship to her son. At Jesus' birth when the shepherds related their encounter with the heavenly host and the angel's message to them, we are told, "Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart" (2:19). What her son will say and do and experience in the world will require a lot of reflection, a lot of soul-searching, prayer, and faith. When the aged holy man Simeon warned her in that previous visit to the temple that her infant child would be a cause of great controversy, his parenthetical warning that she would experience the piercing of a sword was probably, in part, preparing her for the many moments like this one when her son's obedience to the Father would rend her heart.

Jesus' behavior in remaining behind in Jerusalem, leaving Joseph and Mary to worry and wonder what possibly could have become of him, was just the beginning of a growing tension. The biological bond between mother and child will prove insufficient for Jesus. Jesus will ultimately require a bond that arises from faith and the commitment that marks discipleship. After his baptism, when Jesus was fully dedicated to his mission of proclaiming the kingdom of God, Mary and his family (those who were regarded as his brothers) wanted to come to him, but the crowds around Jesus were too large and they couldn't get near. His family sent word through the crowd: "He was told, 'Your mother and your brothers are standing outside and they wish to see you.'" Jesus' response was to redefine his family as those who take to heart his words and put them into action: "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and act on it" (Luke 8:19-21).

After finding the young Jesus in the temple, Mary was troubled, but she didn't doubt; instead, she "kept all these things in her heart" (2:51). This is what completes Mary's motherhood. She not only gave Jesus birth, she not only raised and cared for him, but from the very beginning she pondered his presence in the world and now, his words and deeds. Others have seen, heard, and been amazed, but his mother became our Lord's first disciple.