

## Readings for Christmas Day

FIRST READING: Isaiah 52:7-10

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings glad tidings, announcing peace, bearing good news, announcing salvation, and saying to Zion, "Your God is King!" Hark! Your sentinels raise a cry, together they shout for joy, for they see directly, before their eyes, the LORD restoring Zion. Break out together in song, O ruins of Jerusalem! For the LORD comforts his people, he redeems Jerusalem. The LORD has bared his holy arm in the sight of all the nations; all the ends of the earth will behold the salvation of our God.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 98:1, 2-3, 3-4, 5-6.

***All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God.***

Sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done wondrous deeds; his right hand has won victory for him, his holy arm.

***All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God.***

The LORD has made his salvation known: in the sight of the nations he has revealed his justice. He has remembered his kindness and his faithfulness toward the house of Israel.

***All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God.***

All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation by our God. Sing joyfully to the LORD, all you lands; break into song; sing praise.

***All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God.***

Sing praise to the LORD with the harp, with the harp and melodious song. With trumpets and the sound of the horn sing joyfully before the King, the LORD.

***All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God.***

SECOND READING: Hebrews 1:1-6

A reading from the beginning of the Letter to the Hebrews:

Brothers and sisters: In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he has spoken to us through the Son, whom he made heir of all things and through whom he created the universe, who is the refulgence of his glory, the very imprint of his being, and who sustains all things by his mighty word. When he had accomplished purification from sins, he took his seat at the right hand of the Majesty on high, as far superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. For to which of the angels did God ever say: "You are my son; this day I have begotten you"? Or again: "I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me"? And again, when he leads the firstborn into the world, he says: "Let all the angels of God worship him."

The word of the Lord.

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to John:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be. What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. A man named John was sent from God. He came for testimony, to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came to be through him, but the world did not know him. 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. And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth. John testified to him and cried out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'The one who is coming after me ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.'" From his fullness we have all received, grace in place of grace, because while the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father's side, has revealed him.

The Gospel of the Lord.

### **Reflection for Christmas Day**

"How beautiful ... are the feet of the one who brings glad tidings." What a statement; what does it imply? Are the feet of one who brings bad tidings, conversely, ugly? So much of what we hear in the news is, in fact, ugly; wars, insurrections, poverty, COVID Omicron, racism, climate change, pollution, divided societies and sin. The words of the Eucharistic Prayer I like to use, "We thank you above all for your Son, Jesus Christ. You sent him into this world because people had turned away from you and no longer loved each other," describes our need for God. What, in God's name, are "glad tidings" amid all this chaos and horror? A baby? The Word? How does this work? Does it really? Christmas was two millennia ago; Jesus remains with us in the midst of these troubles. Sometimes we can forget.

The crèche was the idea of St. Francis of Assisi, by tradition. It is a most powerful symbol of Christmas. It depicts, in real time and image, the stories of the gospels of Matthew and Luke. They can fill us with all the warm sentiment of a baby in a manger, surrounded by his mother, father, beasts, shepherds and serenaded by a choir of angels that chant his praise and glory. But does this powerful image actually tell the story of God? The story portrayed, of Jesus' birth, is simple, humble and peaceful. Was it really? Is our image of it an island of perfection in a troubled sea?

Nowhere does the image speak of Mary being pregnant, impregnated by the Holy Spirit and the fetal gestation of the baby, born as Jesus. Nowhere do we hear the stretching of flesh, pushing and pain of the baby's demanding entrance into the world. There is no mess either. It also doesn't tell of the years it took to raise the baby to adulthood. It certainly does not reveal the baby's ultimate mission which is to suffer and die to redeem humanity. Nor does it speak of

eternal life and resurrection promised us by Jesus rising at Easter. Of the Church and Kingdom of God there is no hint, for the Holy Spirit had only visited Mary at the Annunciation. The Spirit was yet to come to the disciples at Pentecost.

The process of becoming a follower and witness of Jesus is also as painful and as messy as the birth of a baby. I can only know what that is like second hand. I have a friend of mine, who is normally eloquent and wise, get up, in public, and proudly proclaim, obliviously, to a group that included a number of mothers, that he knew what giving birth was like. He had just passed a kidney stone. One of the gals asked him how big it was. He told her, "Like a tiny grain of sand." She retorted, "Try pushing out a ten pound baby!" Although I cannot be a mother, I have struggled to live a faithful life in Christ. It is possible to look at it in light of motherhood.

Such a vision of coming to faith, can link each of us, as Christians, to the life of Mary that has a solid experiential grounding. Piety can be an active force as we discern God's movement in our lives. It doesn't keep Mary at a distance and on a pillar, but makes her trust in God something real and an example to us as we live. This is the Feast of the Incarnation; God became a human being and rooted, deeply in our lives. Because Mary said yes to God, she was committed, in faith, to become the one who brought Jesus into this world. Her pain has been our gain. Jesus will change us and our lives in a way not unlike the physical changes that pregnancy made in Mary. Our spiritual lives and physical lives intersect; just as Mary's did. We bring forth Jesus to a waiting world too.

Faith comes to us through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It is inspiration, not insemination, which plants the seed of faith. Faith takes many years to gestate and develop. Sometimes our lives change in the process. These can be uncomfortable and inconvenient changes. As we live a life of faith and become Christ's witnesses, we can be pushed and stretched in ways that are painful. As we live as witnesses we will fail and sin. It also takes a long time for our faith to grow and mature. It is a process and a set of relationships that lasts our lifetime. Christ is always near to us through the process and leads us to eternal life and his Kingdom.

Neither is the crèche the subject of today's gospel. It makes one wonder, doesn't it? The first and second readings always end with the same phrase, "The Word of the Lord." Which leads us to respond, almost as a reflex, "Thanks be to God." Why? God's Word helps us to see beyond the "bad tidings" we both hear and experience as we live life. God speaks God's Word to us. How can we and how do we listen to hear it, let alone make sense of it?

Today's gospel seems out of place, separate from what we expect to hear on Jesus' birthday. Can it give us joy? In the context of the reading, what is God's Word? The passage begins as does the bible, in the book of Genesis, "In the beginning." God spoke and the cosmos came to existence. Creation has led to you and me; to this day and moment. God's Word is creation and life. As with giving birth, life can be tough, inconvenient, painful and messy, but without it we wouldn't be alive.

The late John Lennon, God love him, even though he was not a believer, wrote a song that parallels this gospel in a small way, "Say the word." What, did Lennon conclude, is the word? "Have you heard the word is love? ... Spread the word and you'll be free." This sounds like the Good News of the scriptures. God is love, infinite, eternal and unconditional. We can read in the First Letter of John, "My dear friends, let us love one another, since love is from God and everyone who loves is a child of God and knows God." 1 John 4:7 (The New Jerusalem Bible)

John Lennon may not have professed faith in God, but his words can reveal God's Word. God's Word is Love. God's Word is Jesus; who reveals to us God's Love.

I just attended the funeral, a week ago Friday, of my aunt who was the last and younger sister of my mother. She died of cancer, after two years of treatment, surrounded by her nine children, her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. She had lived eighty seven years and outlived her husband by at least a dozen years. In such sadness, how did God speak? This was one of the few times all my cousins were together. They were raised, and some were born, in Normal, IL. They live spread throughout the country; some nearer to home while the rest live from Colorado to Georgia. They had gathered around my aunt's bed as she breathed her last, having been in hospice for a week.

I drove to Bloomington from here; my family drove there from just south of Green Bay, WI. I was able to remember all the names of my nine cousins, mostly in order. What was God's Word to our grieving family? It was Love. This occasion was an opportunity for our family to gather in my aunt's memory and in the name of Jesus; who reveals to us God's love. That was the joy of gathering and our experience of God's love made flesh in ours. Not all of my family members attend church as Catholics or at all. Yet, in the quote from First John, we met his criteria for knowing God; God is love.

This is an aside. Each year, as long as I remember, my aunt would compose a homemade, hand drawn Christmas card. Since she had just died and had been ill for a while before she died, I didn't expect one this year or ever again. To my surprise and delight, her card was waiting for me when I returned home from her funeral. As always, she had designed it and drawn it by hand. Since the dawn of the computer age she'd made them at home with scanners and printers. Before then, she knew people who owned a print shop. She also had a typed note inside it with her Christmas message. It brought joy and a few tears of gratitude. Words don't have to be God's Word to be powerful. We share them, as God does, because they reveal who we really are.

God doesn't reveal God's presence with supernatural choruses of angels. The glory of God is not contained in a far off heaven or in a heavenly life. It is revealed in our lives and in all the ordinariness of living. How can God's Word speak to us? How can all the world's ills, chaos and sin be healed and forgiven? How can people change? Our problems will never go away; they may change and shift around, but in God's Word, Jesus, God speaks to us. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. Some times God's Word can be very clear.

The original Greek did not say it quite that way. The text actually reads, "And pitched his tent among us." We live in dwellings, houses or apartments. The tent is a reference to the Tent of Meeting in the book of Exodus. It was that place where the people, together, experienced God's presence in their midst. It became corrupted, over the centuries, to be called God's house. God doesn't have a house. God lived then, as God lives now, through, within and among God's people; individually and especially when God's people gather and in Love; the presence of God.

The Word God speaks, in our chaotic and divided times, created the cosmos, keeps it running, saved humanity once and for all, forgives each of us when we sin and speaks his Word, Jesus into our hearts. As we live the faith we share, we speak God's Word to the waiting and needy world. We stumble, bumble and often fail, but we do not have the responsibility or ability to

resolve the world's troubles. It is the infinite, eternal and unconditional God, who is Love, who speaks through us to reveal Jesus.

May we know God's love and speak is Word as we live.

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