

FIRST READING: Genesis 3:9-15, 20

A reading from the Book of Genesis:

After the man, Adam, had eaten of the tree, the LORD God called to the man and asked him, "Where are you?" He answered, "I heard you in the garden; but I was afraid, because I was naked, so I hid myself." Then he asked, "Who told you that you were naked? You have eaten, then, from the tree of which I had forbidden you to eat!" The man replied, "The woman whom you put here with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and so I ate it." The LORD God then asked the woman, "Why did you do such a thing?" The woman answered, "The serpent tricked me into it, so I ate it." Then the LORD God said to the serpent: "Because you have done this, you shall be banned from all the animals and from all the wild creatures; on your belly shall you crawl, and dirt shall you eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike at your head, while you strike at his heel." The man called his wife Eve, because she became the mother of all the living.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 98:1, 2-3ab, 3cd-4

Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous deeds.

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

Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous deeds.

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.

Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous deeds.

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.

Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous deeds.

SECOND READING: Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Ephesians:

Brothers and sisters: Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens, as he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him. In love he destined us for adoption to himself through Jesus Christ, in accord with the favor of his will, for the praise of the glory of his grace that he granted us in the beloved. In him we were also chosen, destined in accord with the purpose of the One who accomplishes all things according to the intention of his will, so that we might exist for the praise of his glory, we who first hoped in Christ.

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL: Luke 1:26-38

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke:

The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming to her, he said, "Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you." But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his Kingdom there will be no end." But Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" And the angel said to her in reply, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing will be impossible for God." Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception

These readings may give the impression that today's feast is for the conception of Jesus. Since the gospel told us how Mary became pregnant with Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit and without any sexual contact, that's understandable. However the Immaculate Conception is about Mary's conception without sin. This is one of the Patronal Feasts of the United States. It was declared a doctrine of the Catholic Church in 1854. There is nothing in scripture that tells the story, only scant prophesy. It answers a deep and very old theological question, "How can God be born a human being by a woman with original sin?" The answer took 1,854 years to answer. Mary was conceived without sin.

This is the theological basis for today's feast. With the context thus set, let's look at today's readings. They tell us some powerful things. People have been people for a very long time; from our very beginnings. Temptation, placing blame, avoiding responsibility, deception and sin are integral parts with the best in us. In Adam and Eve, we can see ourselves. Their ancient story is still ours; we are people of contradiction. However, the one who seems to lose the most is the serpent. Personally, snakes have always fascinated me. They are wondrously adapted creatures.

When I was in Grammar school and learned this story, we never read the actual story. We read bible history. We read about Genesis. We learned that God promised to send a Messiah to save fallen humanity from this "Original" or first sin. To my surprise, the actual text says nothing of such a promise. The only promise is for enmity between people and snakes, locked in mortal combat. God may have had Jesus, the pre-existent eternal Word, in mind, but to find any reference to him in this text of Genesis one must dig very deeply. God states the promise explicitly a bit later in the second book of the bible, Exodus. God promised to raise up another like Moses, anointed priest, prophet and king. Messiah is the Hebrew word for God's anointed one. Christ means the same thing in Greek. Christ is Jesus' title not his last name as many may use it.

The gospel has told a story that we hold very dear. We can get all sentimental over it; Mary, the angel and the expected baby are powerful images. However, look at what transpires. Mary is betrothed in an arranged marriage, not yet wed. She's a young teenage girl. She, in the

implication of her own words, is a virgin. Who's going to believe that God made her pregnant? This was a scandal that could lead to her being stoned to death in the public square for the great sin of adultery! This was no small threat. Honor and uprightness were stalwarts for First Century Jewish families. Saying yes to God's eternal plan could have been a death sentence for Mary— at the hand of her own family. Do we hear the horror of her risk?

“Do not be afraid, Mary,” are powerful words. Mary trusted them. The power of the most high overshadowed her to become pregnant and also kept her safe. God gave Mary, her parents, kin and neighbors the grace to accept the situation. Mary didn't die by stoning, as was proscribed in Mosaic Law. Even her fiancé, Joseph, a true saintly man, accepted the situation. He still accepted Mary as his wife and Jesus as his son. Since we also believe that Mary's virginity is perpetual; in other words, she remained a virgin for her entire life, living as brother and sister was the result of their marriage. We do believe that God's grace is sufficient. This is not a sentimental story. It is a story of risky choices and God's amazing grace in the face of death.

One of my old seminary scripture professors taught us a method to approach the Sunday and big feast-day readings. Begin with the second to set the tone or theme for the readings. Since I've looked a bit critically at the first reading and gospel, Ephesians has given us a context of hope. It is a hymn or canticle of the early Church, sung or read in praise of God and what God has done. Today's feast may be of Mary, but Mary apart from Jesus was just another un-wed teenage mom. Her significance and the meaning of her life center on Jesus. So do ours too.

Mary received, by nature of her choice to say “Yes” to God's plan of salvation, the fullness of the promises of faith. They weren't promises for her; they were her lived reality. The gifts of faith did not come from her baptism; they were part of her life from the moment of her conception. There are four doctrines of Mary that show this. First she is mother of God. Today's gospel told us her story. She was born without sin. She remained a virgin, before, during and after the birth of Jesus. Perpetual means from birth to death. She was taken body and soul to eternal life. For Mary these gifts were hers because of her relationship as Jesus' mom. Baptism makes us sinless. Reconciliation forgives us when we fail. Rising Body and soul will be ours in God's kingdom. We carry Jesus within us into a waiting world. Jesus is also central to our lives. Mary was the first and only to live the life of Christ from conception.

We can read, in Paul, all the hope, trust and gifts of God needed to interpret the readings from Genesis and Luke in the perspective of faith. We know that Jesus has saved us and reversed the pattern of sin, lack of responsibility and deception that has affected us all. We take risks too as we strive to discern and live God's will. All spiritual gifts are ours; life, faith, hope, love and forgiveness. It may be impossible for us, but nothing is impossible for God in Jesus. In the end, we all can say that we are servants of God in faith.

One line, in the gospel, always haunts me. “Then the angel left her.” This is not the tone of Paul's hymn in Ephesians. The gifts of God are permanent. God never leaves us. God is near to sinners and the broken hearted. Jesus promised to remain with us until the end of the age. The Holy Spirit never left her. She was blessed in Christ. Once given, the blessing endures. The blessing of God is being aware of God's presence. God, for Mary and us, is only a thought away. Jesus' saving action was once and for all. We all meet the basic element for salvation; faith in God and in Jesus. We believe because God graced us with it.

To know God and to know God's presence is a powerful gift. Adam and Eve never lost God's love. They lost an easier life, but in all their travails God remained faithful. They learned to know God as they lived their lives. They saw God in their children and set the pattern for

knowing God for all of us. Paul spoke so eloquently and beautifully of the power and grace of God's love. He had been a bounty hunter and hit man for early Christians. God transformed him into an apostle and the Church's greatest preacher. Mary needed no transformation into Christ. God transforms us into the people God wants us to become. God accompanies us on our journey; to the Kingdom of God.

May we always carry Jesus into a waiting world.

James D. Beath

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