

Readings for Tuesday the Fourth Week of Advent

FIRST READING: Malachi 3:1-4, 23-24

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Malachi:

Thus says the Lord GOD: Lo, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me; And suddenly there will come to the temple the LORD whom you seek, And the messenger of the covenant whom you desire. Yes, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who will endure the day of his coming? And who can stand when he appears? For he is like the refiner's fire, or like the fuller's lye. He will sit refining and purifying silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi, Refining them like gold or like silver that they may offer due sacrifice to the LORD. Then the sacrifice of Judah and Jerusalem will please the LORD, as in the days of old, as in years gone by. Lo, I will send you Elijah, the prophet, Before the day of the LORD comes, the great and terrible day, To turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the land with doom.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 25:4-5ab, 8-9, 10 and 14

Lift up your heads and see; your redemption is near at hand.

Your ways, O LORD, make known to me; teach me your paths, Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my savior.

Lift up your heads and see; your redemption is near at hand.

Good and upright is the LORD; thus he shows sinners the way. He guides the humble to justice, he teaches the humble his way.

Lift up your heads and see; your redemption is near at hand.

All the paths of the LORD are kindness and constancy toward those who keep his covenant and his decrees. The friendship of the LORD is with those who fear him, and his covenant, for their instruction.

Lift up your heads and see; your redemption is near at hand.

GOSPEL: Luke 1:57-66

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke:

When the time arrived for Elizabeth to have her child she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy toward her, and they rejoiced with her. When they came on the eighth day to circumcise the child, they were going to call him Zechariah after his father, but his mother said in reply, "No. He will be called John." But they answered her, "There is no one among your relatives who has this name." So they made signs, asking his father what he wished him to be called. He asked for a tablet and wrote, "John is his name," and all were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened, his tongue freed, and he spoke blessing God. Then fear came upon all their neighbors, and all these matters were discussed throughout the hill country of Judea. All who heard these things took them to heart, saying, "What, then, will this child be? For surely the hand of the Lord was with him."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for Tuesday the Fourth Week of Advent

There is mystery in the way God works. Sometimes the greatest gifts in our lives have had truly inauspicious origins. Some of our greatest mistakes can lead us to triumph. We are all the people we are, partly, because of all that we have done and by all we have experienced. We are all alive, though, by God's grace. In the reading from First Samuel, we have a story devoid of such experience. I always lament that many of the daily lessons from scripture have no context with them.

Who were these people? What prompted a mother to hand over her child to a priest? Eli was the High Priest of Shiloh. We can think of a high priest like a bishop. He was an overseer, pastor and preacher. He was a local leader of faith. As a priest he offered sacrifices for people's sins. People would bring livestock and the fruits of the field to be offered to God. God could not eat them, but God savored the aromas of their cooking. They would be roasted and the delightful odors would waft upward to God. The food was then eaten by the priest, priest's family and the attendants of the shrine. This was one of the ways the faithful atoned for sin and supported their holy place. It was part of the sacred tithe for which they were responsible.

This event occurred in a place called Shiloh. Shiloh was in the northern part of the Promised Land. This was before it was consolidated into a kingdom by King Saul and before Jerusalem became its capitol. Jerusalem was the city founded by King David. There was not yet a temple either. People worshipped God at shrines. Shrines were places deemed to be holy where some momentous, spiritual event took place. Sometimes they were located on top of a hill or small mountain. These were deemed by believers as places where they could be closer to God.

Samuel was the first of the great prophets of the Israelite people. He was known, in his time, as a prophet. We have a chronicle of his many deeds and few of his prophesies. There are two books of Samuel dedicated to his life's work. He was also an heroic figure, a super hero of his day. In our modern comic book heroes there's always an origin story. This passage is part of Samuel's. In the biblical tradition, many of the major biblical figures have an origin story. Adam and Eve, Moses, John the Baptist and Jesus all have a story that tells of their specialness.

Hanna and her husband Elkana wanted a baby. They made a pilgrimage to Shiloh to pray for a son. As a result of this trip, and a few other things, they had Samuel. Eli played a part, though minor, in Samuel's birth. This helps, in part, to explain why Hanna and Elkana presented the child, most likely two to three years old, Samuel to Eli. Since we already know that Samuel was a prominent, biblical figure this makes some sense. This is the only explanation for an act of child abandonment. The two of them would be arrested for child abuse if they pulled a stunt like that today. God chose Samuel as God's prophet. God chose God's priest Eli to raise him in the holy place. I was ordained a priest in 1979 and had entered the seminary in 1967. I spent twelve years of my youth in formation for my life's vocation. My mother remembers things I said and did that showed I had the call much earlier in my life than thirteen. I took the bus each day to high school seminary, Quigley, from home. I lived with my family. Samuel lived and was raised at the shrine and didn't have to travel.

Cardinal Cody, God rest his soul, always wore the same miter, his special bishop hat. It had, written around its circumference, Magnificat Anima Mea. It means my soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord. This is opening line of today's gospel. We pray this prayer as part of Evening Prayer or Vespers of the Liturgy of the Hours during Ordinary Time. Its words and sentiments strike deeply.

Mary prays this prayer within a context that we, though our devotion and piety, can miss. Mary is now pregnant, unmarried and carrying the Son of God in her womb. We are often unable to hear the scandal and shame of the events surrounding Jesus' birth. This is Jesus and his mother, surely this is a holy and Godly event. Think of how we deal with un-wed teenage girls. Do we jump for joy? What would we feel and do if it was our teen-aged daughter or grand daughter who came home and announced a pregnancy gave no name but God as the father? We revere the birth of a new baby but not always the way the baby entered this world. Legitimacy is still one of our deepest concerns.

I've always wondered why Mary would journey to visit her kins-woman Elizabeth. Did she travel on her own or did her family want her out of the picture because of the shame she brought on the family? Did Elizabeth really welcome this teen-aged-mother-to-be with open arms? She was older and six months pregnant herself. Put yourself in her situation. How cordial would you be? We downplay such sentiments and thoughts. Perhaps the experience of Mary and Elizabeth can prod us to be a bit more compassionate.

This prayer does not focus on Mary's life or situation. It doesn't dwell on Mary's decision and deeds. It is all about the goodness, greatness and providence of God. Mary's has sought God's presence in her situation and knows all God has done to bring her to that moment of praise. She didn't just accept her fate, she embraced it. She found meaning and significance in God's loving and compassionate nature. She saw her pregnancy as the culmination of God's ancient promise being fulfilled. Mary could endure anything with God. She risked harsh and fatal judgment by her choice. The sentence for sex out side on marriage was death. Within her loving family God protected her from sanction.

Mary prayed this prayer with anticipation of a new baby. However, God's plan included this baby, Mary's and God's son, to die on the cross. Mary had yet to hold Jesus' lifeless, beaten body in her arms at the foot of the cross. Drained of life's blood shed for us, did she hold him. I've never seen it in person, but the image of Michaelangelo's Pieta comes to mind. Could Mary still pray the prayer in that moment? Was the grace and greatness of God yet upon her? Was her "Yes" to God still as sure? My answer is yes. She embraced her life as it unfolded and God never left her.

Can we pray the Prayer of Mary? We face all sorts of trouble, not unlike Mary. We live in chaotic times. Though our sin we compound the world's troubles. Whom do we seek in our weakness? What do we need when in pain? We seek the greatness of God and our spirits rejoice in God our savior. Perhaps each of us can pray the prayer too. God has done great things for us. We live to and in this day

May God keep you healthy and safe. May God give you the grace to keep others safe.

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