

4th Sunday of Advent, Year C

Micah 5:1-4

We only know one thing about this prophet's personal life: he was from an obscure village named More-sheth, nestled in the foothills of Judah far from Jerusalem. Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah. The first three chapters are called "Oracles of Judgment" because in them God judges and condemns Israel for her sins but chapters 4 and 5 are called "Oracles of Comfort" because they offer hope and a time of future restoration including the prophecy which calls for a Messiah, who will be a descendant of the royal line of David and who will be born in Bethlehem. We see this prophecy fulfilled in Christ's birth.⁵

Thus says the Lord:

1 You, Bethlehem (which means "house of bread" and which became the house of heavenly bread.)⁵ **-Ephrathah,** After the conquest of Canaan, Bethlehem was settled by the Ephrathah clan of the tribe of Judah. Therefore, Bethlehem is also called Ephrathah. Some would read it "The town of Bethlehem in the district of Ephrathah." It is located about 5 miles south of Jerusalem.¹ **too small to be among the clans of Judah,** St. Gregory of Nazianzen used this as an example of how the most significant part of the church may be the least known.⁵ **from you shall come forth for me** The speaker is Yahweh. **one who is to be ruler in Israel;** Contrary to expectations, this ruler will come from a relatively insignificant tribe.⁴ **whose origin is from of old, from ancient times.** This ruler's origins will be traced back to the ancient dynasty of David about 1000 years before Christ.² **2 Therefore the Lord will give them up,** Until the new king re-establishes the monarchy, Israel will be subject to other nations.¹ **until the time when she who is to give birth** This reference is to the queen mother, who is mentioned in Gen. 3:15 and Is. 7:14. We see Mary as the fulfillment of these prophecies.² **has borne, Jesus and the rest of his kindred shall return to the children of Israel.** The remnant will return from exile. **3 He shall stand firm and shepherd his flock** David was a shepherd but this ruler will shepherd his people and he will possess the characteristics called for by the prophet Nathan: power, eternity, and universality. Another Messianic trait is also mentioned: peace.² **by the strength of the Lord, in the majestic name of the Lord, his God; and they shall remain, for now his greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth;** **4 he shall be peace.** This means that the king will not only bring peace but that he will embody that peace in himself.³ We too can share in this peace according to Philippians 4:6-7: "Dismiss all anxiety from your minds. Present your needs to God in every form of prayer and in petitions full of gratitude. Then God's own peace, which is beyond all understanding, will stand guard over your hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus." Both Jewish and Christian tradition have understood this passage from Micah as prophetic of the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem.²

Hebrews 10:5-10

This is not an easy passage but it contains very important theology. It is a powerful reminder that Jesus was born in the flesh in order to offer that flesh in sacrificial atonement for the world.⁴

Brothers and sisters:

5 When Christ came into the world, he said: The words of Psalm 40:7-9 are here attributed to the Son at his incarnation.¹ **"Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me;** **6 in holocausts and sin offerings you took no delight.** **7 Then I said, 'As is written of me in the scroll,** This probably refers to the places in the Old Testament where it speaks of the coming of Christ. **Behold, I come to do your will, O God.'"** The meaning of the Psalm is that God prefers obedience to sacrifice; it is not a repudiation of the ritual but a statement of its relative inferiority.¹

8First he says, “Sacrifices and offerings, holocausts and sin offerings you neither desired nor delighted in.” These are offered according to the law. These terms for sacrifice are probably meant to cover the four main types: peace offerings, cereal offerings, holocausts, and sin offerings.¹ These sacrifices are clearly replaced by the one perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ.³

9Then he says, “Behold, I come to do your will.” He takes away the first to establish the second. God’s preferring obedience to sacrifice is interpreted as a repudiation of the OT sacrifices, and their replacement by the voluntary self-offering of Jesus.¹

10By this “will,” “This will” is the will of God, carried out by Christ, that he offer in death the body that God “prepared” for him.¹ The manger is never very far from the cross.⁴ The offering of Jesus’ body means the same as the shedding of his blood; each expresses the total self-offering of Christ.¹ we have been consecrated This means that we have been made holy, we have been consecrated. The effect is like that of the old sacrificial offerings that Jesus’ death replaced. Those, too, were to cleanse and consecrate the people. The great difference is that the old sacrifices had to be repeated over and over. The sacrifice of Christ is offered “once for all.”⁴ through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Christmas finds its ultimate meaning in Easter. The Incarnation, which we celebrate at Christmas, points us toward the death and resurrection of Christ. It is for that sacrifice that he came to live among us.³

Luke 1:39-45

This Gospel passage tells the story of the Visitation of Mary to her cousin Elizabeth which is the second Joyful Mystery of the Rosary.

39Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, Ein Karem is a village situated 5 miles west of Jerusalem and about a four day journey from Nazareth. It is the “town of Judah” which is associated with the life of John the Baptist. Here Zacharia, John’s father, had his summer home and here the Virgin Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth.⁹ One tradition that Luke draws upon is from 2 Samuel, 6:11. He intentionally sets up the subtle but significant parallels between Mary’s Visitation with Elizabeth and David’s effort to bring the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. When he tells of Mary “proceeding in haste into the hill country” we are reminded of David who set out for the same region centuries earlier to retrieve the Ark. Upon Mary’s arrival, Elizabeth is struck by the same sense of awe and unworthiness before Mary that David felt standing before the Ark of the Covenant. Parallels continue as the joy surrounding this great encounter causes the infant John to leap with excitement, much as David danced with excitement before the Ark. Finally, Luke adds that Mary stayed in the house of Zechariah for three months, recalling how the Ark of the Covenant was temporarily stationed in the house of Obed-edom for a waiting period of three months. Taken together, these parallels show us that Mary now assumes a role in salvation history that was once played by the Ark of the Covenant. Like this golden chest, she is a sacred vessel where the Lord’s presence dwells intimately with his people. Just as the ark contained the tablets of the Old Law, the manna, and the staff of Aaron, Mary holds in her womb Jesus Christ the Messiah who is the New Law, the true Bread from Heaven, and the true high priest who offers His own life for us. We should also note that the ark served as a mighty weapon in Israel’s holy wars. Mary plays a decisive role in the Church’s spiritual battles. Upon the revelation of the new Ark of the Covenant in Rev. 12, the great battle in the heavens begins. Mary is the spiritual mother of all Christians (Rev. 12:17) and she is granted power and protection over the dreaded dragon who cannot prevail against her (Rev. 12:13-16.) One more consideration is that the Jewish people expected the Ark to reappear at the coming of the Messiah.⁷ Luke also draws upon a second tradition from the Book of Chronicles. This time he brings into his story a highly significant expression once connected with the Ark. The term shows up in verse 42 where Elizabeth bursts out with an exuberant cry at the arrival of Mary and her Child. Although the Greek verb translated as “cried out”

seems ordinary enough, this is the only place where it is found in the entire New Testament. Its presence in the Greek Old Testament is likewise sparse, appearing only five times and each time the expression is used there, it forms part of the stories surrounding the Ark of the Covenant. It actually refers to the melodic sounds made by Levitical singers and musicians when they glorify the Lord in song. It thus describes the music that was played before the Ark as David carried it in procession to Jerusalem (1 Chron 15:28 and 16:4-5) and as Solomon transferred the Ark to its final resting place in the Temple (2 Chron 5:13). Alluding to these episodes, Luke connects this same expression with the melodic cry of another Levitical descendant, the aged Elizabeth. She too lifts up her voice in liturgical praise, not before the golden chest, but before Mary. Luke's remarkable familiarity with these ancient stories enables him to select even a single word that will whisper to his readers that this young Mother of the Messiah is the new Ark of the Covenant.⁷

[40where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.](#)

[41When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leaped in her womb,](#) Tradition has suggested that John was sanctified in the womb of his mother Elizabeth by the presence of Jesus in the womb of Mary. When the angel Gabriel announced John's birth to Zechariah in Luke 1:15, he said that John would "be filled with the Holy spirit from his mother's womb."⁵ [And Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit,](#)

[42cried out in a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women,](#) Elizabeth blesses Mary with the same words once spoken to Jael after she crushed the head of Sisera. The phrase was also used to honor Judith after she beheaded Holofernes. These women were blessed for their heroic faith and courage in assassinating the military commanders of the enemy armies hostile to Israel. Mary will follow in their footsteps, yet in her case both the enemy destroyed and the victory won will be greater, for she will bear the Savior who crushes the head of sin, death, and the devil underfoot.⁸ One of the oldest Christian prayers ever found (older even than the oldest New Testament manuscripts!) is one to Mary asking for the protection of her prayers.⁵ Following the angel's salutation to Mary, (Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee...) this verse forms the next part of the prayer known as the "Hail Mary." (Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.) [and blessed is the fruit of your womb.](#)

[43And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord](#) "The Mother of my Lord" is a title applied to the Queen Mother of the Davidic Kings of Judah. In the Middle East it was common for the mother of the king to be the queen, rather than his wife. The Queen Mother was called the "Gebira." Being aware of the Gebira tradition, Elizabeth announces Mary's queenship and declares her amazement that the Queen of Israel should come and be her midwife!⁷ [should come to me?](#)

[44For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy.](#)

[45Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled."](#) Mary's divine motherhood was the first Marian dogma expounded by the Church. The Ecumenical Council of Ephesus (A.D.431) defined her unique relationship to Christ and honored her with the title "Mother of God."⁸

Some of the material for this commentary was taken from (1) "The Jerome Biblical Commentary," (2) "Amos, Hosea, Micah" by Neal Flanagan, O.S.M., (3) "workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 1998" by Lawrence E. Mick, (4) "workbook FOR LECTORS AND GOSPEL READERS: 1995" by Aelred Rosser, (5) Commentary Notes of Sean Innerst and Tim Gray, (6) "Dictionary of the Bible" by John L. McKenzie, S.J., (7) "Chapter IX of Catholic for a Reason" by Timothy Gray, (8) "Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of Luke" with commentary and notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, and (9) "A Pilgrim In The Holy Land" by Fr. Godfrey O.F.M..

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.