

THIS TRANSFORMING
CYCLE C **WORD**

Commentary on the Readings for Sundays and Feast Days
of Cycle C of the Lectionary through 2025,
including full Scripture passages from
The Message: Catholic/Ecumenical Edition
by Eugene Peterson and William Griffin

ALICE CAMILLE



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DEDICATION

In memory of some lovely hidden souls who whispered the word incarnate to me: John Paskevich, Robert Koslosky, Mrs. Luce, Mireille Reiffel Gale, Dwight Leeray, Robert McKinley, Teresa Carpenter. They'd each be very surprised to find their names inside a book.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Most of this commentary breathed its first life in the series *Exploring the Sunday Readings* (Twenty-Third Publications) through the assistance of my long-time editors, Mary Carol Kendzia and Daniel Connors. This book achieved its present form with a lot of help from my friends. Erin J. Boulton assembled the liturgical calendar projections and spotted any future missing weeks; when you find the stray moveable feast you're looking for, you can thank Erin for troubleshooting it first! Paul Boudreau inserted the complete Scripture passages from *The Message: Catholic/Ecumenical Edition* (ACTA Publications), considerably livening up the readings with a fresh Scriptural voice, as well as a thousand other excruciating editorial tasks. I thank God every day for friends like these, and please consider them your friends too as you reap the benefits of their labor on these pages.

A NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER

Alice Camille is a true treasure of the Catholic Church in the United States:

a woman who can make the Scriptures come alive in new and exciting ways; a serious student of the Bible who understands how to use it effectively in catechesis and religious education; a lay person who tries to live out the kingdom of God in her daily life. Camille has been reflecting on the meaning of the Bible for committed Catholics for many years and was instrumental in reviewing the translation of the additional writings for *The Message: Catholic/Ecumenical Edition*. So, when ACTA Publications wanted to produce a new series of three books containing reflections on the readings for each of the Sundays and Feast Days of Cycles A, B, and C and include the translation of those readings from *The Message*, Alice Camille was our first (and only) choice.

First, a word about *The Message* by Eugene Peterson. Many Catholics and others have never heard of it, even though it has sold over 16 million copies in various editions. It is a compelling, fresh, challenging, and faith-filled translation of the Bible from the original languages into contemporary, idiomatic American English. Eugene Peterson is a Presbyterian minister, pastor, writer, speaker, poet, Bible scholar, and translator. He specializes in what is called “paraphrasal” translation, which tries to reproduce the spirit of the original text rather than provide a literal translation of the words. Rev. Peterson did not include the additional writings of what some Jews and Protestants call the Apocrypha, and Catholics and others call the Deuterocanonical books in the original version of *The Message*. Instead he recruited his friend and colleague, William Griffin, to translate these works in his same style. Griffin, a Catholic layman, writer, and translator, took his text from the *Nova Vulgata*, the revised and expanded version of the original Latin Vulgate that was approved for use by Catholics by Pope John Paul II in 1998. These additions were added to *The Message* in the biblical order expected by Catholics and published in 2013 as *The Message: Catholic/Ecumenical Edition*.

You may find the Scripture passages in this book jarring at first. Certainly, you will not hear this translation read at Mass. But they might provide new insights into overly familiar texts and help you think again about what they might have to say to people today—especially when accompanied by Camille’s accessible yet erudite reflections.

We encourage you to try *This Transforming Word* for your own prayer and spiritual discernment as you prepare to preach (if you are the homilist) or listen (if you are a congregant) or discuss (if you belong to a small intentional group or community). Included in this book for Cycle C are the Sunday and Feast Day readings

for the years 2016, 2019, 2022, and 2025. Separate books are available for Cycle A in 2017, 2020, and 2023, and for Cycle B in 2015, 2018, 2021, and 2024. If you would like to receive the complete readings for each Sunday from *The Message* at no charge, simply go to www.TheMessageCatholic.com and sign up to receive them by email.

To purchase a copy of *The Message: Catholic/Ecumenical Edition* by Eugene Peterson and William Griffin or books by Alice Camille, including *Invitation to Catholicism*, *Invitation to the Old and New Testament*, *Isaiah and the Kingdom of God*, *The Forgiveness Book*, *The Rosary*, and *Seven Last Words*, go to any seller of books or visit www.actapublications.com. If you have any questions or comments, please contact me at gpierce@actapublications.com.

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Note on translating the name of God. In the original Hebrew text of the Old Testament, the generic name for divinity used by both Israel and its neighbors is translated God (or god). But the unique and distinctively personal name for God that was revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:13-14) Rev. Peterson has translated as "God" in *The Message*.

INTRODUCTION

“Use words truly and well. Don’t stoop to cheap whining.

Then, but only then, you’ll speak for me.

Let your words change them.

Don’t change your words to suit them.”

Jeremiah 15:19

Words, words, words. The world is choked with them, as Hamlet wearily lamented. But most of them don’t amount to much. Thomas Merton agreed. After a short trip beyond the silence of his cloister at Gethsemani Abbey, Merton observed: “There is so much talking that goes on that is utterly useless.”

We talk, text, and email. Media shouts from every corner of the room and each bend in the road. Yet in the barrage of advertising and so-called reporting, little is actually communicated. “The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here.” That sentence, from Abraham Lincoln, is a rare exception in a sea of forgettable phrases. What you and I say today will not only quickly disappear. It’s a wonder if anyone hears us in the first place.

There is a cure for the endless, mindless, meaningless rant. Out of the silence, up from the deep, down from the heavens comes a transforming word that changes hearts—and *that* changes everything. This word transfigures because of its own remarkable metamorphosis: from cosmic eternal word to earthbound mortal flesh. This word shatters the barriers of time and needed to be spoken only once. Now it lives and moves and has being in those who hear it and reply.

This book is for those who are listening and hope to respond. Each Sunday and feast of the church year, the transforming word echoes its challenge. We hear it through stories of patriarchs and matriarchs who dare to embark in new directions trailing an untested divinity. It shouts in the oracles of wild prophets madly in love with an unlikely future. It sings in psalms and canticles. It beckons in Lady Wisdom. It invites us to come and see in the gospels, and to repent and believe in letters of instruction. Creation testifies to it. Apocalypse mystically reveals it. And all the while this longing word is calling through the centuries, eternity waits in hushed silence for the freely rendered human response. Yours. Mine. Everybody’s.

ADVENT

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

..... Promises, Promises

FIRST READING » JEREMIAH 33:14-16

“Watch for this: The time is coming”—GOD’S Decree—‘when I will keep the promise I made to the families of Israel and Judah. When that time comes, I will make a fresh and true shoot sprout from the David-Tree. He will run this country honestly and fairly. He will set things right. That’s when Judah will be secure and Jerusalem live in safety. The motto for the city will be, ‘GOD Has Set Things Right for Us.’”

Promises are made to be broken, as the saying goes. That may be true of the promises we make, but it has never been true for God. All too many of the commitments we make end up in splinters along the way of our good intentions. The heartbreak of divorce, the awkward relationships with our parents or children, the cheating that goes on in the workplace and in government—all remind us how far our ideals fall from our reality. But when God makes a covenant, nothing stands in the way of its fulfillment. Neither sin nor death itself bar the way of God’s bringing into being all that the Divine Will intends.

The people Israel knew many generations when God’s promise seemed distant and unlikely. At times their own failures kept them in hiding, like Adam and Eve discovering their nakedness. Seasons of slavery and exile made the hope of rescue fade away. But love goes in search of the beloved relentlessly, and God will not abandon a people so dearly formed and nurtured. In the seasons of our greatest failures, when we hide from God (and think God hides from us), we might surrender into the arms of love instead. Forgiveness is waiting there, and the joy of the old embrace.

Which of your promises is in need of mending this season?

SECOND READING » 1 THESSALONIANS 3:12 – 4:2

May the Master pour on the love so it fills your lives and splashes over on everyone around you, just as it does from us to you. May you be infused with strength and purity, filled with confidence in the presence of God our Father when our Master Jesus arrives with all his followers.

One final word, friends. We ask you—urge is more like it—that you keep on doing what we told you to do to please God, not in a dogged religious plod, but in a living, spirited dance. You know the guidelines we laid out for you from the Master Jesus.

Purity. Most of us know what that is: it’s the first five minutes after we’ve come from the confessional, before we encounter the first live person! Purity is a rather

inhuman state, if you take the concept of original sin to heart. Our world is marked by sin, weakened to the breaking point with opportunities to punt our integrity. If the cashier is rude, we snap back while knowing it's better to be charitable. It's hard to go through a single day without regretting some exchange that could have been more loving, more gracious, more holy.

Are we ever pure, or what used to be known as "in a state of grace"? A rich understanding of the term leads to a surprising conclusion: we are always in a state of grace—a country of grace—a kingdom of unsurpassing grace! Whether or not we partake of it is up to us, free will ever being operative. But we're never without the companionship of grace and the possibility of truly holy living. It's our baptismal birthright. Though we are ever sinners in need of God's mercy, we are likewise "splashed" with the love that God pours on lavishly. Sometimes religious language gets it just right.

**Imagine yourself standing in the kingdom of grace.
What's perceptible to you here that you don't always see?**

GOSPEL » LUKE 21:25-28, 34-36

"It will seem like all hell has broken loose—sun, moon, stars, earth, sea, in an uproar and everyone all over the world in a panic, the wind knocked out of them by the threat of doom, the powers-that-be quaking.

"And then—then!—they'll see the Son of Man welcomed in grand style—a glorious welcome! When all this starts to happen, up on your feet. Stand tall with your heads high. Help is on the way!

"But be on your guard. Don't let the sharp edge of your expectation get dulled by parties and drinking and shopping. Otherwise, that Day is going to take you by complete surprise, spring on you suddenly like a trap, for it's going to come on everyone, everywhere, at once. So, whatever you do, don't go to sleep at the switch. Pray constantly that you will have the strength and wits to make it through everything that's coming and end up on your feet before the Son of Man."

When we read end-of-the-world passages in Scripture, we usually focus on the destruction unleashed on the unsuspecting world. "Apocalypse now" sounds really scary—and it's supposed to. But not to believers. *Be not afraid* is one of the most oft-repeated pieces of advice in the New Testament. If you're with Jesus, there's nothing to fear, even when the boat is rocking in a violent storm.

Some may die of fright when disaster strikes, whether it's apocalyptic or a mere crisis of modern living. We all know folks who die a thousand deaths when their checking accounts are overdrawn. Fearful living is not faithful living. For believers there's no disaster large enough to be bigger than God's sovereignty. And though at first glance it seems strange to begin Advent and the new church year on such a note, on further examination it is the perfect place to start. We know we're not really awaiting the coming of the Christ child but rather the coming of Christ the King (remember, last Sunday?) Redemption is at hand. We have nothing to fear.

**What awakens your fear?
How does your faith address this fear?**

WE RESPOND

Revive an old promise that's been broken. Make peace with a friend or family member. Treat yourself as a holy vessel. Renew your promises to God in prayer and faithfulness.

“Whatever you do, don’t go to sleep at the switch. Pray constantly that you will have the strength and wits to make it through everything that’s coming and end up on your feet before the Son of Man.”

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

..... Hope on the Horizon

FIRST READING » BARUCH 5:1-9

Jerusalem, get rid of the dull clothes of grief and put on your best dress, the clothes of glory meant for you from all eternity.

Wrap yourself in a lovely layered cloak; pick one from the justice collection. On your head put a crown in honor of the Eternal One.

God wants to show off how splendid you can look.

As of now, your name will be on the permanent divine invitation list; look under the headings of Peace and Justice and the Glory of God's Worship.

Arise, Jerusalem, and take your stand on high; look to the east, and you'll see your children gathering, rejoicing in the memory of God.

They were abducted a long time ago by their enemies and led away, made to walk the many miles on foot. God, however, will lead them back to you, carried with glory as though on a royal throne.

God has decided to level the mountains, turning the hard rock into gravel; the gorges and valleys he has ordered filled and leveled. He will do this so that the house of Israel may make the return trip to you in the security of the glory of the Most High.

At the command of God, forests and fragrant woods will spring up to provide shade for the returning pilgrims.

God will lead Israel home with joy, lighting the way with the majesty, mercy, and justice only he can command.

My parents exemplify the courage and innocence of an earlier generation, having raised heaps of children. Those children grew up and promptly moved away. It was understood that we would. Half of us, in fact, moved out of state. It must have been tough on my folks to have a house lined with children one moment, and empty the next.

But at least once a year thereafter, a swarm of us would descend on them from all directions; and more often, someone would drop in for a visit, complete with spouse and grandchildren. When such a visit was expected, Mom or Dad would be glancing out the windows periodically to catch the first sight of us. Dad would sometimes wait in the street and flag down the approaching car from five blocks away. It might have been embarrassing, if it weren't so wonderful to be loved like this.

The image of Jerusalem waiting for the return of her exiled children is like this. Expectant, excited, and all gussied up, the city of David awaits the children of the promise, led home by the Lord in joy. Wherever we roam we can expect to be greeted like this, when we return at last to the One who is our one true home.

Where are you received with joy?

What does this reception teach you of the power of welcome?

SECOND READING » PHILIPPIANS 1:4-6, 8-11

Each exclamation is a trigger to prayer. I find myself praying for you with a glad heart. I am so pleased that you have continued on in this with us, believing and proclaiming God's Message, from the day you heard it right up to the present. There has never been the slightest doubt in my mind that the God who started this great work in you would keep at it and bring it to a flourishing finish on the very day Christ Jesus appears.

He knows how much I love and miss you these days. Sometimes I think I feel as strongly about you as Christ does!

So this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well. Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental gush. Live a lover's life, circumspect and exemplary, a life Jesus will be proud of: bountiful in fruits from the soul, making Jesus Christ attractive to all, getting everyone involved in the glory and praise of God.

Parents, teachers, and mentors know the satisfaction of watching those in their protection come to full flower. Having walked the distance between first inquiry to Easter with dozens of incoming Catholics, I've shared the joy of people falling in love with the gospel, little by little. When Paul expresses his enthusiasm for the blossoming community at Philippi, he reveals this same parental pride. A new generation of believers means new life for the whole church!

What we offer our children, or students, or catechumens, is the gift of our hope. We hope they will find God's love in their lives, lasting and strong. We hope they will increase in knowledge and understanding, make good choices for themselves and for the world. As my father would say as I returned to college each September: "Be good and stay out of trouble." A simple hope, but it encompassed his wish for my happiness.

Advent is the season of hope. We await the coming of a new heaven and a new earth. We await a birth and a fresh start, a brand new calendar. Even if we didn't "stay out of trouble" last year, we have a chance to try again. Hope teaches us that it's possible.

**Whom do you teach? Who teaches you?
Where do lessons of hope come from in your experience?**

GOSPEL » LUKE 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the rule of Caesar Tiberius—it was while Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea; Herod, ruler of Galilee; his brother Philip, ruler of Iturea and Trachonitis; Lysanias, ruler of Abilene; during the Chief-Priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas—John, Zachariah's son, out in the desert at the time, received a message from God. He went all through the country around the Jordan River preaching a baptism of life-change leading to forgiveness of sins, as described in the words of Isaiah the prophet:

*Thunder in the desert!
“Prepare God’s arrival!
Make the road smooth and straight!
Every ditch will be filled in,
Every bump smoothed out,
The detours straightened out,
All the ruts paved over.
Everyone will be there to see
The parade of God’s salvation.”*

Imagine the valleys of your life. Those times when yawning need was met by silence. When the desire for companionship found only absence. When there were bills to pay and only holes in your pockets.

Now reflect on the mountains. The tasks that seemed insurmountable. The illnesses that dragged on and on. The hurt that seemed to grow rather than diminish with time. The challenges that seemed to have been designed with someone bigger and stronger than you in mind.

The way of the Lord is the smooth way. No valleys, no mountains, just a journey through pleasant country. Never been there? Neither had Jesus on this earth. He sums up his experience with a sad evaluation: “My kingdom is not of this world.” This world has a rough topography, complete with sin, death, and crucifixion. Yet we trust the word of Jesus because he’s traveled these same valleys and mountains on the road to salvation. We’re never so lost that we can’t be found on these wild roads.

**Map out the prominent valleys and mountains of the past year.
Where do you see hope in the smooth way?**

WE RESPOND

“Nothing should ever trouble or haunt thee,” Teresa of Avila wrote in her prayer book. Hold a burial ceremony for the ghosts of the past year and put them to rest at last.

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

.....Lessons in Joy

FIRST READING » ZEPHANIAH 3:14-18a

So sing, Daughter Zion!

Raise the rafters, Israel!

Daughter Jerusalem,

be happy! celebrate!

*GOD has reversed his judgments against you
and sent your enemies off chasing their tails.*

*From now on, GOD is Israel's king,
in charge at the center.*

*There's nothing to fear from evil
ever again!*

Jerusalem will be told:

"Don't be afraid.

Dear Zion,

don't despair.

*Your GOD is present among you,
a strong Warrior there to save you.*

*Happy to have you back, he'll calm you with his love
and delight you with his songs."*

God sings for you. For YOU. The image is overwhelming. While the heavenly hosts sing their praise to God, and church choirs everywhere join their voices to the angels', the divine Lord of all raises the harmonic Triune Voice for your sake. Like a lover standing under the balcony of the beloved, God sings of love and desire for you.

Talk about Christmas carols! What does the song of God sound like? The ancients believed that angel-song held the stars and planets in alignment and kept the heavenly spheres from colliding into each other. Harmony is the sophisticated name for holding disparate sounds at a sufficient distance from one another so as not to cause a train wreck in the ear. We can imagine that the song of God was heard first at creation, bringing every creature into perfect alignment, from the largest galaxy to the smallest blade of grass. The harmony God installed in the universe has two notes, justice and peace. You don't have to wonder long how the discordance of sin interfered with our ability to hear it. But God's song is heard again wherever we regain the duet of justice and peace. Peace on earth, good will toward all!

**Where do you hear the notes of justice and peace sounded most clearly?
How do you contribute to this song?**

SECOND READING » PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7

Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean, revel in him! Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you're on their side, working with them and not against them. Help them see that the Master is about to arrive. He could show up any minute!

Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life.

How near is the Lord to your heart? If you had to make a list of your passions, would God be first? In the top five? Would God figure in your priorities at all?

However you answer, don't be ashamed. Be proactive. An examination of conscience isn't intended to inspire guilt but rather conversion. Now is the time to change. The Lord is near. So the good news is, we don't have to go very far to encounter God, no matter where our lives have taken us. As the prophets repeated over and over, all we have to do is turn. God is right here, with arms outstretched to receive us on the spot.

This is cause for celebration! The name of the Third Sunday of Advent, *Gaudete*, means "rejoice," celebrate. Even those for whom holidays bring no cheer—who experience the holiday season as the most desperate time of the year—are offered consolation this week. God is near. Though family may live faraway (or just behave that way), we are not abandoned. Though money is short and need is great, we are seen, known, and protected in Christ. Those who believe this are free to give their joy away.

How have you demonstrated today our faith in the nearness of the Lord?

GOSPEL » LUKE 3:10-18

The crowd asked John the Baptist, "Then what are we supposed to do?"

"If you have two coats, give one away," he said. "Do the same with your food."

Tax men also came to be baptized and said, "Teacher, what should we do?"

He told them, "No more extortion—collect only what is required by law."

Soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?"

He told them, "No shakedowns, no blackmail—and be content with your rations."

The interest of the people by now was building. They were all beginning to wonder, "Could this John be the Messiah?"

But John intervened: "I'm baptizing you here in the river. The main character in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He's going to clean

house—make a clean sweep of your lives. He'll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he'll put out with the trash to be burned."

There was a lot more of this—words that gave strength to the people, words that put heart in them. The Message!

No doubt about it: John the Baptist was an amazing, impressive, charismatic figure in his generation. Yet he did everything in his power to direct the attention away from himself and toward the One yet to come. His teaching, even his baptizing, was mere preparation for the Christ. John knew he was a bit player in a cosmic story.

Being human, we often fail to look past the messenger to the message. How many of us have become unglued when our favorite pastor is transferred, when an admired spiritual teacher falls from grace, when a hero we've followed across the years dies or disappears from view. We may find we've pinned our faith to the wrong source, settling for the herald instead of the heralded. Human beings will always disappoint, but God never does.

If our joy is to be complete, we can't fasten it to anything material. Rust sets in and moths destroy, but Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. If lasting joy is what we want, we have to find it in the One whose life and love endures.

Who or what is the source of your joy?

WE RESPOND

People of *Gaudete* share their joy in acts of kindness. Recall a kindness you may have withheld. There's still time to offer it.

*Let petitions and praises
shape your worries into prayers,
letting God know your concerns.*

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

..... Small Is Beautiful

FIRST READING » MICAH 5:1-4a

*But you, Bethlehem, David's country,
the runt of the litter—
From you will come the leader
who will shepherd-rule Israel.
He'll be no upstart, no pretender.
His family tree is ancient and distinguished.
Meanwhile, Israel will be in foster homes
until the birth pangs are over and the child is born,
And the scattered brothers come back
home to the family of Israel.
He will stand tall in his shepherd-rule by GOD's strength,
centered in the majesty of GOD-Revealed.
And the people will have a good and safe home,
for the whole world will hold him in respect—
Peacemaker of the world!*

In parochial school one year, the Sister decided to seat us according to size. There was a logic to it, of course. She wanted to be sure we could all see the blackboard. But woe to the person who wound up in the first row, first seat. That meant you were a real pipsqueak! It was as humiliating as being dressed in a sailor suit! It led to unflattering names and endless teasing! As you might expect, I hated sitting there.

Kids don't like to have their littleness pointed out. Nor do nations, minority groups, or the poor. Small things get trampled in a world that values size and power. In too many ways and too many places, small is defined as unimportant.

God loves small. Nothing is bigger, more potent, more important than the Source of all that is, and yet the Maker of all chooses small over large, every time. God chooses the poor over the rich, widows over kings, the barren woman over the mother, children over adults, Israel over the whole Roman Empire. Only in the eyes of human beings does big count. How blest is little Bethlehem to bring forth the hope of ages.

**Who is "small" in your family? Neighborhood? Workplace?
How are they treated?**

SECOND READING » HEBREWS 10:5-10

*That is what is meant by this prophecy, put in the mouth of Christ:
You don't want sacrifices and offerings year after year;
you've prepared a body for me for a sacrifice.*

*It's not fragrance and smoke from the altar
that whet your appetite.*

*So I said, "I'm here to do it your way, O God,
the way it's described in your Book."*

When he said, "You don't want sacrifices and offerings," he was referring to practices according to the old plan. When he added, "I'm here to do it your way," he set aside the first in order to enact the new plan—God's way—by which we are made fit for God by the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus.

When we hear the word sacrifice, we're liable to cringe. *Sacrifice* generally means we're obliged to give something up and get nothing in return. But the word has its roots in a similar word: *sacred*. *Sacrifice* literally means to make something or someone holy.

The routine holocausts at the Jerusalem Temple were intended for the consecration of God's holy people. In the word *consecration* we again hear that root meaning: to make sacred. The people offered the best they had: crops or livestock from the unblemished portion of their wealth. By offering the best, they didn't seek to lose but to gain or regain the holiness of the rest. In sin-offerings, they literally surrendered a portion in order to save the whole. The point was not to lose but to restore what had been lost by sin.

When we speak of the sacrifice of Jesus, we acknowledge what was lost. But we emphasize what is restored to us: reconciliation with God, access to unending life. The cross is about victory, the consecration of God's people once for all. Next time you're asked to make a sacrifice, try thinking of it as an invitation to holiness and wholeness.

How do you make a sacrifice from what you've been given?

GOSPEL » LUKE 1:39-45

Mary didn't waste a minute. She got up and traveled to a town in Judah in the hill country, straight to Zachariah's house, and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby in her womb leaped. She was filled with the Holy Spirit, and sang out exuberantly,

*You're so blessed among women,
and the babe in your womb, also blessed!*

*And why am I so blessed that
the mother of my Lord visits me?*

*The moment the sound of your
greeting entered my ears,*

*The babe in my womb
skipped like a lamb for sheer joy.*

*Blessed woman, who believed what God said,
believed every word would come true!*

At our parish we call them L.O.L.s: Little Old Ladies. They're the backbone of the community. They come to meetings, bake for bake sales, crochet for fundraisers, pray up a storm, drop their money in the baskets, bring communion to the sick, volunteer for everything. They go about their work almost invisibly, but what they accomplish is enormous. Without L.O.L.s, a pastor once observed, you could close the doors of most parishes.

Elizabeth was a Little Old Lady. To look at her, one might not expect much more to come from a person of her advanced years. Certainly, the contribution of new life was biologically beyond her. Yet God's grace proved that assumption wrong, as it often explodes our careful theories and plans. God's grace can overshadow us and bring new life from the "too old," the "too young," and every other place where we've closed a door in our minds. God may be opening a door for you right now, in the place you least expect.

**What aspect of your life have you already determined is fruitless or barren?
Do you believe God can act there?**

WE RESPOND

'Tis the season to be generous. As we wrap those last presents and send those last cards, remember those who will receive no gift and no friendly greeting. Give a gift that won't be returned in kind, just as God gave Jesus to us. Merry Christmas.

*He will stand tall in his shepherd-rule
by GOD's strength,
centered in the majesty of GOD-Revealed.
And the people will have a good and safe home.*

CHRISTMAS SEASON

THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD

..... Merry Is the Word

FIRST READING » ISAIAH 52:7-10

*How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of the messenger bringing good news,
Breaking the news that all's well,
proclaiming good times, announcing salvation,
telling Zion, "Your God reigns!"
Voices! Listen! Your scouts are shouting, thunderclap shouts,
shouting in joyful unison.
They see with their own eyes
God coming back to Zion.
Break into song! Boom it out, ruins of Jerusalem:
"God has comforted his people!
He's redeemed Jerusalem!"
God has rolled up his sleeves.
All the nations can see his holy, muscled arm.
Everyone, from one end of the earth to the other,
sees him at work, doing his salvation work.*

Maybe there was a time when "merry" was a part of every person's working vocabulary. But now we mothball this word from about December 26 until the following December. Nothing else gets to be merry anymore except Christmastime. And that may be as it should be.

Perhaps we need a singular word to describe the spirit of this season. God does something in the nativity of Jesus that happens once in history and is never repeated. And while we speak of "good news" in situations as wide-ranging as an unexpected snow day or a clean bill of health from the doctor, the news of this one special birth in eons of babies makes all other good news seem remarkably situational. God not only rolls up the divine sleeves, but dives into a straw-covered bassinet to share our predicament. And from there to redeem it.

"Beautiful" is Isaiah's word for the bearer of such news. "Merry" is the effusive spirit that believes it and the one whose path is transformed by such a reality.

**What are the elements that make the season of Christmas beautiful?
How can you carry them forward throughout the year?**

SECOND READING » HEBREWS 1:1-6

Going through a long line of prophets, God has been addressing our ancestors in different ways for centuries. Recently he spoke to us directly through his Son. By his Son, God created the world in the beginning, and it will all belong to the Son at the end. This Son perfectly mirrors God, and is stamped with God's nature. He holds everything together by what he says—powerful words!

After he finished the sacrifice for sins, the Son took his honored place high in the heavens right alongside God, far higher than any angel in rank and rule. Did God ever say to an angel, "You're my Son; today I celebrate you"? Or, "I'm his Father, he's my Son"? When he presents his honored Son to the world, he says, "All angels must worship him."

God made the world in the beginning. It will be delivered to Christ in the end. In the meantime, the world is in our hands. What an awesome responsibility, an incredible privilege, and a tremendous opportunity!

The world is ours. What are we doing with it? Liberating or exploiting? Grabbing or sharing? Celebrating or criticizing? Investing our talents or burying them in the ground? Blessing or cursing? On Christmas day we're often on our best behavior, giving freely and forgiving lavishly. After all, "'tis the season." But when we take down the tinsel, will we revert to our normal Scrooge selves? Is God-with-us just an octave of days that interrupts our otherwise narrow lives and shuttered hearts?

The Christmas spirit isn't meant to be abnormal. It shouldn't be put away with the last ornament or discarded with the shedding pine tree. Time remains in our custody from Creation till Kingdom Coming. What will you do with yours?

What will you take with you from this Christmas season into the new year?

GOSPEL » JOHN 1:1-18

*The Word was first,
the Word present to God,
God present to the Word.
The Word was God,
in readiness for God from day one.*

*Everything was created through him;
nothing—not one thing!—
came into being without him.*

*What came into existence was Life,
and the Life was Light to live by.*

*The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness;
the darkness couldn't put it out.*

There once was a man, his name John, sent by God to point out the way to the Life-Light. He came to show everyone where to look, who to believe in. John

was not himself the Light; he was there to show the way to the Light.

The Life-Light was the real thing:

*Every person entering Life
he brings into Light.*

*He was in the world,
the world was there through him,
and yet the world didn't even notice.*

*He came to his own people,
but they didn't want him.*

*But whoever did want him,
who believed he was who he claimed
and would do what he said,*

*He made to be their true selves,
their child-of-God selves.*

*These are the God-begotten,
not blood-begotten,
not flesh-begotten,
not sex-begotten.*

*The Word became flesh and blood,
and moved into the neighborhood.*

*We saw the glory with our own eyes,
the one-of-a-kind glory,
like Father, like Son,*

*Generous inside and out,
true from start to finish.*

John pointed him out and called, "This is the One! The One I told you was coming after me but in fact was ahead of me. He has always been ahead of me, has always had the first word."

*We all live off his generous bounty,
gift after gift after gift.*

*We got the basics from Moses,
and then this exuberant giving and receiving,*

*This endless knowing and understanding—
all this came through Jesus, the Messiah.*

*No one has ever seen God,
not so much as a glimpse.*

*This one-of-a-kind God-Expression,
who exists at the very heart of the Father,
has made him plain as day.*

Of all four gospels, John's is easily the most mystical. The first community of faith gave way to a second or a third before John's story was written down. These later disciples had something the original ones never had: time to process what they were learning about living the faith of Jesus. Reflecting on their experience, they saw that most of human history was a dark place into which God's hope shone like the noon-day sun.

And when you try to talk about the light that Jesus brings into the life of a true believer, you start to sound like the passage quoted above. It's breathless and curious and enthusiastic and sort of weird all at once. If Christ lives in you already, then you totally get it. And if your "child-of-God" self hasn't yet encountered the "Life-Light" and experienced "one-of-a-kind glory" in the "God-expression" of Jesus—well, frankly, it's all going to sound rather mad. And it is mad, weird, wonderful that God chooses to emerge from within the swamp of our history to meet us. Only love behaves so inscrutably.

**What have you done for love's sake
that seemed utterly mad to the people around you?**

WE RESPOND

Love is crazy, not rational, impossible to reason with. Love follows love-logic and responds accordingly. Do something for love's sake today that you would do for no other reason. And have a Merry Christmas!

*No one has ever seen God,
not so much as a glimpse.
This one-of-a-kind God-Expression,
who exists at the very heart of the Father,
has made him plain as day.*

THE HOLY FAMILY OF JESUS, MARY, AND JOSEPH

.....Family Is a Risky Business

FIRST READING » SIRACH 3:2-7, 12-14

Yes, you children, listen to the advice of your parents. Follow it and you'll be saved. Parents should be honored and respected by their children. Honor your mother and father and God will wipe out your past sins; he'll help you deal with the occasions of present sins; he'll hear your daily prayer. Honor your mother and it's like putting money in the bank. Honor your father and your own children will honor you. Your prayers will be answered. You'll live a longer life. Obey your father and your mother will rest well.

Child, support your father in his old age; don't do something that will make him sad. If he shows signs of senility, give him a pass. Don't turn from him in his last days. Caring for a father won't go unnoticed. Your reputation will increase. In the day of trial you'll be remembered and your sins will melt like ice in the sun.

I've gone on record as an adult who gets along with her parents. For the sake of today's feast, I'll tell the rest of the story. I didn't grow up in an Ozzie-and-Harriet home. The problems we faced as a family were not resolved in a half hour, generally speaking. My parents quarreled, and since there were ten of us in a handful of rooms, they argued "in front of the children" as a matter of course. I'd say we broke a lot of the rules that family guidebooks advocate. By the time I got to college, I identified with the majority of my peers who complained that their parents drove them up the wall.

The flip side of the story is that we kids drove our FOLKS up the wall. Our music, our attitudes, our choices were maddening to them. For some years there was a direct correlation between the times my father and I argued, and the number of times we were speaking to each other at all. Once in my twenties, I remember shouting angrily across a room at him, "No matter what you say, I believe you LOVE me!" And he shouted back just as aggressively, "And I believe YOU love ME!" Then we collapsed tearfully in each other's arms. It was the bottom line of every argument, spoken or not.

How do you honor a parent and still disagree?

**Is it possible to honor a parent who is,
by any objective measure, a bad parent?**

SECOND READING » COLOSSIANS 3:12-21

So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else

you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.

Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other. None of this going off and doing your own thing. And cultivate thankfulness. Let the Word of Christ—the Message—have the run of the house. Give it plenty of room in your lives. Instruct and direct one another using good common sense. And sing, sing your hearts out to God! Let every detail in your lives—words, actions, whatever—be done in the name of the Master, Jesus, thanking God the Father every step of the way.

Wives, understand and support your husbands by submitting to them in ways that honor the Master.

Husbands, go all out in love for your wives. Don't take advantage of them.

Children, do what your parents tell you. This delights the Master no end.

Parents, don't come down too hard on your children or you'll crush their spirits.

The ancient world used household codes to spell out appropriate behaviors between members of a household, from the patriarch down to the lowest servant.

The codes listed here did not belong to Christians only, but were taken for granted by Jews, Romans, and Greeks alike. The hierarchy itself—men over women, parents over children, masters over servants—was not in question. People were naturally situated in the household based on gender, age, and station. The codes that worked their way into Christian correspondence are softened by mutual responsibilities of the dominant person to his (generally his) subordinates. Husbands are instructed to treat their wives affectionately. Parents must nurture the self-esteem of their children, and masters should not treat slaves harshly (see Colossians 4:1). Introducing the dignity of the subordinate was a liberal idea back then.

Our country was founded on the radical principle that the old-world system of class and hierarchy no longer apply. Since the start of the American experiment, we've wrestled with putting equality into practice. Race, gender, and the economic divide continue to assert tangible barriers. The tyranny of the old has been replaced in some ways with the tyranny of the youth culture. We may be on the way, but the dignity of each individual remains a liberal idea.

**We live with hierarchies in politics, religion,
the school system, the workplace, and family life.
where do you see the dignity of the subordinate championed,
and where is it challenged?**

GOSPEL » LUKE 2:41-52

Every year Jesus' parents traveled to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up as they always did for the Feast. When it was over and they left for home, the child Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents didn't know it. Thinking he was somewhere in the company of pilgrims,

they journeyed for a whole day and then began looking for him among relatives and neighbors. When they didn't find him, they went back to Jerusalem looking for him.

The next day they found him in the Temple seated among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions. The teachers were all quite taken with him, impressed with the sharpness of his answers. But his parents were not impressed; they were upset and hurt.

His mother said, "Young man, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been half out of our minds looking for you."

He said, "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that I had to be here, dealing with the things of my Father?" But they had no idea what he was talking about.

So he went back to Nazareth with them, and lived obediently with them. His mother held these things dearly, deep within herself. And Jesus matured, growing up in both body and spirit, blessed by both God and people.

We're offered only one glimpse of the childhood of Jesus. Curiously, it isn't a tale of the remarkable serenity of Joseph's household, or how famously they all got along. The story of the holy family as we know it centers on an event familiar to every parent: the day the child got lost. Or we could retell it in more accurate terms: the day the child was found.

Jesus is found where we recognize, even before Mary and Joseph do, he rightly belongs. Just because his parents didn't know where he was doesn't mean that he's lost. He's been in God's house all along. This is an encouraging word to every parent who has "lost" a child through divorce, disagreement, or some incomprehensible life choice. We may not know how to "regain" our children, but they are never out of God's hands. God knows where they are, even when we don't, and God is not about to let one of the little ones be lost. God loves our children even more than we do. Though our anxiety for them is great when they disappear from view, our trust in God assures us that they're not out of God's sight.

**Have you ever been lost, literally or otherwise?
Have you ever "lost" anyone? How did you find them again?**

WE RESPOND

Take a risk with your family, living and deceased. Forgive the wrongs that have been done, ask forgiveness for the wrongs you've committed. Find each other again within the household of love.

MARY, MOTHER OF GOD

..... Naming the New Thing

FIRST READING » NUMBERS 6:22-27

GOD spoke to Moses: “Tell Aaron and his sons, This is how you are to bless the People of Israel. Say to them,

*GOD bless you and keep you,
GOD smile on you and gift you,
GOD look you full in the face
and make you prosper.*

*In so doing, they will place my name on the People of Israel—
I will confirm it by blessing them.”*

Happy new year! What shall we call it? This isn't a question we normally ask of a year in our culture. When I lived in Chinatown in San Francisco years ago, I found it intriguing that my Chinese neighbors name and celebrate each year according to the animal spirit associated with that year: rooster or horse, snake or dog or dragon or rat. While this makes for a fabulous annual parade, I rarely found that the following twelve months lived up to its advance press, animal-wise.

While I don't advocate the Chinese zodiac, or the one in the daily papers either, I do acknowledge the power of names to endow a certain sense of purpose. If we name a child after a saint, that patron's intercession is always accessible. If we look upon an event as a blessing or a curse, it tends to deliver what we expect. God claims a people with the divine Name, just as in Baptism we're each claimed for Christ. So call the new year Rita or Jose if you like, but be sure to consecrate it to holy purposes.

Name three things you hope for this year.

How will you invest yourself in those hopes: in prayer, action, resources, time?

SECOND READING » GALATIANS 4:4-7

But when the time arrived that was set by God the Father, God sent his Son, born among us of a woman, born under the conditions of the law so that he might redeem those of us who have been kidnapped by the law. Thus we have been set free to experience our rightful heritage. You can tell for sure that you are now fully adopted as his own children because God sent the Spirit of his Son into our lives crying out, “Papa! Father!” Doesn't that privilege of intimate conversation with God make it plain that you are not a slave, but a child? And if you are a child, you're also an heir, with complete access to the inheritance.

It would deeply pain Saint Paul today to be called anti-Semitic. Not only was he Jewish and proudly so, he was a Pharisee: one of the estimated 6,000 or so of his generation who chose to live out an exacting obedience to the law of Moses. Though

he was corralled into the camp of Jesus by a personal experience of the Risen Lord, Paul never stopped being a devout Jewish believer, nor did he see this loyalty as a conflict of interest with his all-out devotion to Christ Jesus.

So when Paul is quoted above as saying Jesus redeems us from being “kidnapped by the law,” he’s not saying the law of Moses is an evil hijacker from which we need to be rescued. What we all need redemption from is the truly misguided notion that our own moral exactness can ever be the means of our rescue. Paul was a perfect Pharisee in his own words, flawless and without blame. Yet when he encountered Jesus he understood how brittle and little moral perfection is compared with being a child of God.

**Have we been having an “intimate conversation with God,”
or an imperative relationship with religious law?**

GOSPEL » LUKE 2:16-21

They left, running, and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. Seeing was believing. They told everyone they met what the angels had said about this child. All who heard the shepherders were impressed.

Mary kept all these things to herself, holding them dear, deep within herself. The shepherders returned and let loose, glorifying and praising God for everything they had heard and seen. It turned out exactly the way they’d been told!

When the eighth day arrived, the day of circumcision, the child was named Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived.

Mary and Joseph name their child Jesus, which means “God saves.” Later he’ll be called Messiah or Christ, which means (in Hebrew and in Greek), “the anointed one.” John’s gospel also calls him “the Word” that existed with God before time began. And Saint Paul will call him the wisdom of God.

But eight centuries before Jesus was born, the prophet Isaiah had predicted a child by the name of Immanuel, “God with us.” It’s a grand and ambitious name. Could God possibly come so close to us that Divinity could actually reside inside our humanity? Did the humble shepherds who witnessed the revelation of the angels that night fully appreciate what was being communicated in this birth announcement? It seems that Mary, full of the “feminine genius” that Pope Francis talks about, understood how one life can hide inside another and didn’t question the mystery she embodied and delivered. Once God is with us, can that reality ever be taken back?

**Do you name God as near or far, adversary
or friend, saving help or source of condemnation?**

WE RESPOND

The gift of time is placed in your hands. God is as near as you allow. Say a prayer, inviting the Lord of the Universe to be your guest this coming year.

THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

.....Go and Search Diligently

FIRST READING » ISAIAH 60:1-6

“Get out of bed, Jerusalem!

Wake up. Put your face in the sunlight.

GOD’s bright glory has risen for you.

The whole earth is wrapped in darkness,

all people sunk in deep darkness,

But GOD rises on you,

his sunrise glory breaks over you.

Nations will come to your light,

kings to your sunburst brightness.

Look up! Look around!

Watch as they gather, watch as they approach you:

Your sons coming from great distances,

your daughters carried by their nannies.

When you see them coming you’ll smile—big smiles!

Your heart will swell and, yes, burst!

All those people returning by sea for the reunion,

a rich harvest of exiles gathered in from the nations!

And then streams of camel caravans as far as the eye can see,

young camels of nomads in Midian and Ephah,

Pouring in from the south from Sheba,

loaded with gold and frankincense,

preaching the praises of GOD.”

God’s favorite. That was the name we used for a friend of ours who always seemed to move in the fast lane of good fortune. If he lost a job, another was offered to him before sundown. He had a knack for finding live/work situations in which he was exempt from paying rent. And that isn’t to say he lived in garrets; most of these situations involved living in the finest homes with spectacular views. He never owed a dime and never made an enemy. He seemed to lead a charmed existence, and every fresh example of it caused us great wonder.

Our friend lived like a king, but he owned nearly nothing. Everything he possessed could be put into his car. When he died, we cleaned out his rooms in a day. This apparently poor man had traveled to all the great capitals of the world, and we found pictures of him standing in front of cathedrals and landscapes we had only heard about. With nothing but a smile to pay for it all, he hadn’t left one dream unfulfilled.

Was he really God’s favorite, or did he know something the rest of us haven’t learned yet? Upon this simple man, God’s glory shone, and what we once called luck, we now call grace.

How do you separate grace from luck?
The answer to a prayer from coincidence?

SECOND READING » EPHESIANS 3:2-3a, 5-6

I take it that you're familiar with the part I was given in God's plan for including everybody. I got the inside story on this from God himself.

You'll be able to see for yourselves into the mystery of Christ. None of our ancestors understood this. Only in our time has it been made clear by God's Spirit through his holy apostles and prophets of this new order. The mystery is that people who have never heard of God and those who have heard of him all their lives (what I've been calling outsiders and insiders) stand on the same ground before God. They get the same offer, same help, same promises in Christ Jesus. The Message is accessible and welcoming to everyone, across the board.

Can a fresh word come from God? Or is revelation a door that swung closed after the time of the Bible? Many believe "there is nothing new under the sun," as the writer of Ecclesiastes concluded. God has spoken; it is written. If you want to know the truth of a thing, look to the past.

Those who hold a fundamentalist approach to revealed truth sit tight on the cover of the Bible and refuse to admit a new word. But our Catholic faith maintains there are two prongs to the truth: Scripture and Tradition. The ongoing experience of the community contributes to Tradition like the mouth of a river collects minerals deposited there across generations. We believe in the Holy Spirit, as we profess in the Creed. That is, we believe God's Spirit lives among us and guides us ever deeper into the heart of the mystery. We're citizens of the New Testament every bit as much as Paul and Barnabas, Mary Magdalene, and the Twelve. If you want to know the truth of a thing, look to the community that gathers at each Eucharist.

**What truth might be made known in our generation
that was not known before now?**

GOSPEL » MATTHEW 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem village, Judah territory—this was during Herod's kingship—a band of scholars arrived in Jerusalem from the East. They asked around, "Where can we find and pay homage to the newborn King of the Jews? We observed a star in the eastern sky that signaled his birth. We're on pilgrimage to worship him."

When word of their inquiry got to Herod, he was terrified—and not Herod alone, but most of Jerusalem as well. Herod lost no time. He gathered all the high priests and religion scholars in the city together and asked, "Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?"

They told him, "Bethlehem, Judah territory. The prophet Micah wrote it plainly:

*It's you, Bethlehem, in Judah's land,
no longer bringing up the rear.
From you will come the leader
who will shepherd-rule my people, my Israel."*

Herod then arranged a secret meeting with the scholars from the East. Pretending to be as devout as they were, he got them to tell him exactly when the birth-announcement star appeared. Then he told them the prophecy about Bethlehem, and said, "Go find this child. Leave no stone unturned. As soon as you find him, send word and I'll join you at once in your worship."

Instructed by the king, they set off. Then the star appeared again, the same star they had seen in the eastern skies. It led them on until it hovered over the place of the child. They could hardly contain themselves: They were in the right place! They had arrived at the right time!

They entered the house and saw the child in the arms of Mary, his mother. Overcome, they kneeled and worshiped him. Then they opened their luggage and presented gifts: gold, frankincense, myrrh.

In a dream, they were warned not to report back to Herod. So they worked out another route, left the territory without being seen, and returned to their own country.

The magi from the east had been on the road a long time. They had invested many seasons journeying after this foreign star. They invested more than time, but also money and a certain amount of professional esteem. If it should turn out that they'd followed this star for nothing, they would seem like utter fools.

Herod invested nothing in his quest to find the child they were ardently looking for. Herod was above such a diligent search. He wasn't going to stir one foot from his throne to locate this alleged new king. And so he never found him. Never found him to destroy him nor to recognize him and offer his gift.

How much have we invested in our search for the Christ child? Do we send others to do the job for us—priests, religious, missionaries, lay leaders—or have we made a personal commitment to follow the light wherever it leads and whatever it costs? How much time and wealth are we willing to spend? Or will we never take the journey at all?

**Examine your commitment to seek and follow Christ.
What are you willing to give, and what do you withhold?**

WE RESPOND

Epiphany means "the manifestation," or literally to be "hit by the hand" of truth. Consider how you have been hit by the reality of God's presence in your experience, and what it teaches you.