

I speak to you in the name of God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.
Please be seated.

I personally find it very interesting that the idea of grouping together readings for each Sunday in order to present a particular message is a practice that the Christian Church has followed since the 4th century. I also find it encouraging that many different Christian denominations participated in the work of the Consultation of Common Texts in the mid-1960s which resulted in the Common Lectionary. This work was revisited in the early 1990's which brought about the Revised Common Lectionary that we continue to use today. From the first Sunday of Advent through to Trinity Sunday each year, the Old Testament reading is always closely linked to the Gospel reading appointed for each Sunday. The psalm or the canticle (as we have today) is always intended to be a kind of reflection on the first reading. In each year of the 3-year cycle of the lectionary, there is a focus on one of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, or Luke, with John being drawn upon in every year of the cycle. As we are now in Year C, the Gospel of Luke will be the focus for the next 11 months. Today is the final Sunday of Advent for this year, and as we move this week towards Christmas Eve and Christmas day, it seems only fitting that the overarching theme of our readings appointed for today is that of *birth*.

Our reading from Micah is actually a poem. It is a prophecy that was made about 700 years before the birth of Christ. Micah was telling the people of Israel, who were under siege, that a king is coming who will be the personification of peace. It is important to note that Micah predicted that Bethlehem would be the birthplace of a child who will be a descendent of King David. Several generations will pass before this prophecy is fulfilled.

The language of Canticle 18 – also known as the Magnificat – closely follows Micah's prophecy. This conversation between Mary and her cousin,

Elizabeth, is really about Mary confiding in Elizabeth that she knows that God has chosen her to deliver the baby that was foretold 7 centuries earlier. As a faithful Jewish young woman, Mary was beginning to understand the massive significance of what was about to happen. We would have to think that the faith in God that Mary and Elizabeth shared helped to sustain and nurture both women over the 3 months that they spent together. We can only guess at the conversations that they shared over that time, and how they must have reflected often on that time as the years went by and both of their sons grew to adulthood.

Our passage from Hebrews is one that biblical scholars think was written about 30 years or so after the events of the crucifixion and the resurrection. The author is making a comparison between traditional animal sacrifices that were part of the Jewish rituals for making atonement for sins and Christ as the ultimate sacrifice for our sins. In its entirety, the book of Hebrews is thought to actually be one continuous sermon. Its purpose was to highlight the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as marking the birth of a new relationship between God and humankind.

But it is our Gospel reading from Luke that really brings the focus to this morning's theme of *birth*. These are the words that preceded our canticle 18 reading that we heard in place of the traditional psalm. If we were to go right back to the beginning of this first chapter of Luke, we would be reminded of the faithfulness of Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, who were told by the angel Gabriel that they were to have a son – even though Elizabeth was well past childbearing age. Six months later, Mary is also visited by the angel Gabriel and told that she will also bear a child; the Son of God. Gabriel then tells Mary to go visit her cousin, Elizabeth, and her husband, Zechariah. At the start of our Gospel reading this morning, Mary is enroute to make this visit. When Mary enters the house and speaks, Elizabeth's unborn child recognizes her presence. Without

Mary sharing any of her news, Elizabeth knows all about this amazing miracle that is happening to her younger cousin.

It is in the last sentence that Elizabeth shares with Mary that we can find a message for ourselves; a message that has extended over some 2000 years. Elizabeth says, “And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord”. We can easily expand that to also say, “And blessed is he who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to him by the Lord.” Although we may not receive actual visits from Gabriel or any of the other angels, God does continue to speak to us in this generation. It can be challenging to hear God speak, because our lives are often very full with distractions that can interfere with our abilities to pick up on God’s messages to us. You may recall that our Gospel reading from 2 weeks ago featured John the Baptist calling us to straighten the paths of our lives in order to cut out some of those distractions. One of the significant challenges that Christians face today is that it is very difficult to recognize that God has fulfilled his word to us when we have not been able to hear or discern his word in the first place. We have the opportunity in this new Christian year to be every bit as blessed by God as Elizabeth and Mary were in this account from Luke. That doesn’t mean that we will necessarily be called upon by God to take on the enormous responsibilities that both of those women accepted as an act of faith. But it does mean that we can experience the kind of joy and peace that both Mary and Elizabeth experienced as a result of having heard and having responded with faith to whatever it is that God is calling us to do in this year ahead.

As we are starting this new Christian year and as we are about to experience the birth of a new calendar year, I would encourage you to take some time this week to quietly read the first 2 chapters of Luke. I know that you are all familiar with the words of the Christmas story. It is a tradition for us to hear those words

every year. But tradition has a purpose that is larger than giving us comfort and a sense of the familiar. For Christians, tradition is the thread that runs across time, linking us directly back to the people of both the Old and New Testaments. If you are feeling that you perhaps need to borrow from someone else's faith in the days or months or even the years ahead, revisit these first 2 chapters and I am sure that you will find inspiration in the examples of Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and the angels. Amen.