

4th Sunday in Advent

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8B-12, 14A, 16
<i>Response</i>	For ever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 89:2-3, 4-5, 27, 29
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 16:25-27
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 1:26-38

The Fourth Sunday for Advent in Year B may also surprise you as a reader of the Gospels, because it too is not taken from the Gospel according to Mark. Again, the reason for this is pretty obvious if you have read the Gospel of Mark, it is that Mark doesn't have any account of the Nativity. He doesn't have any account of the birth of Christ, and so for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, in order to prepare us in particular for the feast of Christmas, the Church here again supplements Mark's Gospel with a reading from the Gospel of Luke, and in particular from the famous story of the Annunciation. Just as a side note, I might emphasize that when you're going through the Advent season, especially if you go to daily Mass and Mass during the Christmas season, you're going to hear the account of the Annunciation more than once. And that's good, it is meant to reinforce the importance of this moment of the coming of God into the world through the yes of the Blessed Virgin Mary. So on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, the Church reads the Gospel of Luke 1:26-38. This is the famous story of the Annunciation. It's well known to us but I want to look at it now and focus in particular on the emphasis that Luke is going to give to the kingdom of David as something that's appropriate in particular for the Advent season. So let's read through it together. Luke 1:26-38 says:

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this

might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end." And Mary said to the angel, "How shall this be, since I have no husband?"

Literally in the Greek, "How can this be, since I do not know not man?" This is a reflection of Mary's virginity here.

And the angel said to her, "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, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible." And Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.¹

Okay, so what is this reading? What is going on in this reading? In particular, why does the Church give us the story of the Annunciation for the Fourth Sunday of Advent? Well the obvious answer to that is that this prepares us for the miracle and for the celebration of the birth of Christ at Christmas. So the Annunciation, the conception of Christ, Mary's yes to God's message to the angel, is the necessary precondition for the birth of Christ, which is what we are going to celebrate at Christmas. However, I would also stress for us that this particular account of the Annunciation in Luke's Gospel has some elements of it that are important because they are tied to the Advent season of expectation. In particular here, I'd like to focus on the elements of the text that point to the fact that Joseph and Mary are

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

restoring and fulfilling the promises that were made to King David in particular. So let's look at that.

First, notice — I highlighted this when I was reading — that when it says that the angel came to Mary as a virgin, that she wasn't just betrothed to a guy named Joseph, she was betrothed to a man named Joseph of the house of David. Now why does Luke emphasize that? Well because it shows us that Joseph was a member of the royal family. This is really important. Sometimes we tend to think about Joseph, about the fact that he was a carpenter, about the fact that he was poor, and that's all true. But what we sometimes overlook is that although Joseph was just a carpenter or just an artisan, a worker, someone who worked with hands, a tradesman, and although he was extremely poor as the Gospel of Luke is going to go on to show us when it shows us that at the presentation in the Temple they offer the sacrifice of two turtledoves — which was what you would give when you didn't even have enough money to buy a lamb — that is how poor Mary and Joseph were; so although Joseph was poor, although he was a simple artisan, the reality was he belonged to the royal family of David.

So a modern analogy to this might be if you were a member of Queen Elizabeth's family. If you are member of the British Royal family, everyone would know who you were. And even if you were just a Duke or Duchess or one of the lesser figures, you would still be a person of some importance in a monarchical society. Well ancient Israel was a monarchy that was established by God, and David's royal family was a family of preeminence. But after the Babylonian exile in 587 B.C., when the empire of Babylon came and conquered the land of Israel, destroyed the temple, decimated the Royal family, and took the king into exile; in a sense what happened is all of his descendants and heirs went, so to speak, underground because they were no longer in power. And they continued to be out of power for centuries, all the way down to the first century A.D. And yet as Jews, one of the things that was very important to them was their genealogy, their family tree. Who was their father? Who was their father's father? And how, especially, they would be connected to the royal family, if they were members of the royal family?

So when Luke says that Joseph was of the house of David, that's like a little bomb that he is setting off letting you know, especially if you are a Jewish reader, this guy was part of the royal family. And Mary is betrothed to him, so her child is

going to be a rightful heir to the throne of David. So at the time of the Annunciation, who is sitting on the throne? Well, Caesar in Rome is ultimately the king of the world. He is the Emperor. But there's also a puppet king named King Herod the Great, who's reigning over Judea and Jerusalem at the time of Jesus' birth. And Herod is an Idumean, he's descended from Edom, which is one of the tribes that goes back to Esau. In other words, he's kind of like a half-Jew, but he is certainly not a member of the royal family. He has no right to sit on the throne. He has no claim to be royalty and yet he's in power. He is in charge. He has wealth. He has influence. Whereas Joseph, who's actually the heir, in a sense, to the throne of David's kingdom, is just a poor carpenter who can't even afford to buy a lamb at the Temple. So that's the irony here that is taking place in the story of the Annunciation. God is going to fulfill his promises to the house of David, but he is going to do it in a really unexpected way. He's going to come to this poor man Joseph and his virgin bride, and through them he is going to fulfill the promises that he once made to David.

And you see that in the next part of Gabriel's announcement. When you look at Gabriel's annunciation to Mary, four elements of what Gabriel says stand out. He says, number one, that Mary's child will be great. Number two, that the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. That is really important. It is another explicitly Davidic illusion. Number three, he will be called son of the most high. And number four, of his kingdom there will be no end. Now those four elements: his greatness, the throne, his identity as son of God and his everlasting kingdom, those four elements of Gabriel's announcement here are illusions. They are actually quotations almost from a prophecy that was made to David in the Old Testament in the book of 2 Samuel 7, which just so happens to be the first reading for this Sunday.

So if you turn back to the Old Testament for just a minute, look at the first reading for the Fourth Sunday of Advent. It's from 2 Samuel 7:1 and following. Now before I read it let me just put this in context. In 2 Samuel 6, David has brought the Ark of the Covenant up to Jerusalem, because the center of his kingdom is going to be the worship of God. That is why David's a man after God's own heart. It is not because he has never sinned, he is going to go on to sin later in the book of Samuel. The reason he is such a special king is because he wants God to be the center of his kingdom. And so in 2 Samuel 7, David looks at the fact that he has

this great palace and he decides to build something more than just the tabernacle for the Ark of the Covenant. "I want to build a temple. I want to make a house for God to dwell in so I can give him the glory that he rightly deserves." And so in response to that, this is what we read in the first reading for this Fourth Sunday of Advent:

Now when the king dwelt in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies round about, the king said to Nathan the prophet, "See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells in a tent."

Tent means the tabernacle.

And Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that is in your heart; for the LORD is with you." But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan, "Go and tell my servant David, `Thus says the LORD: Would you build me a house to dwell in?"

Then it skips down a few verses and says:

Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David, `Thus says the LORD of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies.

And here are the key verses:

Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. I will be his father, and he shall be my son. When he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, with the stripes of

the sons of men; And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever."

Pause there. Notice the four elements I highlighted from the Annunciation. David's offspring, his dynasty, is going to be great. His descendants will be great, number one. Number two, he will establish the throne of David's kingdom, which remember, the throne is always a symbol for the king's authority. It is kind of like a permanent symbol for the fact that he rules over the people. Number three, and this is really striking, God describes the offspring of David as his own son. "I will be his father, and he shall be my son." This is the first time in the Old Testament any individual person is explicitly designated as a son of God. Before this point, Israel is called the son of God in Exodus 4:22:

And you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the Lord, Israel is my first-born son

But they are referred to as the son of God in a kind of collective sense, but here the individual king, the offspring of David, the heir to David's throne, is called the son of God in the individual sense. He is going to be the adopted son of God. Every king after David would be called son of God whenever they would receive the throne, receive the kingship. And finally number four, this might be the most important one in some ways because it is the most problematic one. God swears, he promises to David, that his kingdom and his house will stand not just for a long time, or for a thousand years, or for 2000 years, but forever. So it's an everlasting kingdom that God promises to David. So why is that important? Well those four elements we see are reflected in the Annunciation of Mary. So what's going on is Gabriel is deliberately pronouncing the fulfillment of the promise that was made to David as now taking place through Christ. That is the first point.

The second point is that the reason that that has to happen is because of the history of Israel. Now we might not be as familiar with this if you are a Christian living in modernity — a lot of times we are not as knowledgeable about the Old Testament as we could be. But ancient Jews would've known the history of David's kingdom, they would've seen the problem with the history of David's kingdom. And it is this, although God promised David, through Nathan around 1000 B.C., that

David's throne and his kingdom would last forever, the reality was that David's throne and his kingdom fell apart in just a few hundred years.

And this is how it goes. From 1000 B.C., God promises David an everlasting kingdom. Then by 922 B.C., when Solomon dies, the kingdom splits in two. So in less than a century the kingdom ends up divided, and the 10 northern tribes breakaway. Those are called the kingdom of Israel or the northern kingdom, and then the two southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin, they stay with David's successor, they stay with the rightful Davidic king and with the Temple, but now you have a split monarchy. You have a divided kingdom instead of a united kingdom. Within a couple hundred years, by 722 B.C., the 10 northern tribes of Israel, that northern kingdom, are decimated by the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians come in and they destroy, they wipeout and they conquer the 10 northern tribes, and then they take them into exile in what scholars call the Assyrian Exile.

Then, less than a couple centuries later in 587 B.C., the two remaining tribes, Judah and Benjamin, are also taken in exile by the Babylonians. The Babylonian Empire comes, they destroy the temple, they burn Jerusalem to the ground and they slaughter the Israelite king and some of his descendants. They gouge out his eyes right after killing his son so that the last thing that he would see would be the death of his sons. Then they take him and they bring them into exile and they make slaves of them basically. So in other words, by the time you get to 587 B.C., which is a long time, it's a few centuries later, but it's not forever, what has happened to the promise of God? What has happened to God's promise to David that his kingdom and his throne and his heir would always be in power? Well it looks like God has broken his promise. It looks as if God's promises to David have failed and that the kingdom is basically destroyed and never going to rise again. And that's really the situation from 587 B.C. all the way down to the time of Christ, who begins his public ministry around 30 A.D. in the first century, for all those hundreds of years the Davidic kingdom is no more.

Now, to be sure, around 538 B.C. some of the Jews and the Levites come back from Babylon in what is called the return from exile, and they rebuild the Temple and they rebuild Jerusalem at the end of the Babylonian captivity, but they never restore the Davidic monarchy. They never restore the Davidic kingship and they certainly never restore the united Davidic kingdom, because for all those centuries,

although the two tribes came back from exile, what happened to the greater part of the 10 tribes? They are still scattered amongst the Gentile nations. They are lost. This is where you get the legend of the lost tribes of Israel. Whenever I am teaching this to my students, in order to give an analogy with this, I like to just use the 13 colonies of the United States. It would be as if Canada or some other foreign power came in and conquered 10 or 11 out of the original 13 colonies of the United States. What would that have done to the union at that point? Well it would have just decimated any ability to function as a united sovereign power.

So the same thing is true with Israel. Yes, two of the tribes did go into exile and came back, but they are two of the smallest tribes, Judah and Benjamin. The majority of the kingdom is gone. And that's what it is like all the way down to the first century A.D. when an angel comes to a virgin in Nazareth who is betrothed to this poor man named Joseph, who yes happens to be part of the royal family, but you wouldn't know it from what he possesses and what he has, and says to that little virgin, “you are going to be the mother of the Messiah. You are going to be the mother of the son of God. His name is going to be great and he is going to sit on the throne of David his father, and unlike David's kingdom, which fell apart, his kingdom will last forever and ever.” This is a momentous event. This is what — you know the hopes and fears of all the years — the Jewish people have been waiting for for centuries. That somehow, against all odds, God would keep his promise and God would restore the kingdom and God would bring the Messiah and he would undo everything that had happened with the sin of the people of Israel and the fall of the kingdom of David.

And that's what happens to Mary in the Annunciation. She hears that at last the kingdom is going to come, but it is going to come through her and through her son. And the mystery here is that whereas the Davidic king's were called the son of God in a metaphorical sense, or like a covenantal sense, they were adopted as sons of God when they were installed as kings, Mary's child is going to be the actual son of God. He's going to be the eternal son of God, because God himself is going to divinely fecundate her womb. He is going to fill her womb with life through the power of the Holy Spirit so that the child that will be born, will not just be holy, but will be called son of God in the literal sense. She will actually bear God's son as king of the world and King of kings and Lord of lords. That's language from Revelation, but you can see how it applies here. So that's the connection between

the old and new. I think this Sunday out of all Sundays of this year in Advent is really the most striking in terms of how the New Testament is concealed in the old, and the old is revealed in the new, and that the lectionary is deliberately designed to make the old and new come together and come alive for us so that we see what God is doing in the good news of the new covenant.

Before I go on though, let me just make sure I don't skip the Responsorial Psalm. So for this week the Responsorial Psalm is back to the book of Psalms again. That is the ordinary thing. It is from Psalm 89, which is a very famous Psalm about the covenant with David. So this is where essentially the Psalmist reiterates in the form of a song, what we read about in 2 Samuel 7 in the form of Nathan's prophecy. He elaborates on it more more. I want to highlight a couple of verses here. It begins like this:

I will sing of thy steadfast love, O LORD, for ever;
with my mouth I will proclaim thy faithfulness to all generations.
For thy steadfast love was established for ever,
thy faithfulness is firm as the heavens.

Thou hast said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
I have sworn to David my servant:
`I will establish your descendants for ever,
and build your throne for all generations.'" [Selah]
Let the heavens praise thy wonders, O LORD,
thy faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones!

Pause there. Notice, can you see why this Responsorial Psalm is a problem? Because if David's kingdom is in shambles for all those centuries, then you have this Psalm singing that God is faithful, God is trustworthy, God said it's going to last forever; and yet you look around and it doesn't look like it has. So it presses home the point that some day there is going to have to be a Messiah. Someday the Messiah is going to come and he's going to fulfill this, because when God swears a promise he doesn't break his oath. Human beings do that all the time. They'll swear, they will sign a contract, they will give their word and then they break it because they are weak and they are fickle, or sometimes they are just lying. But God doesn't lie. He's truth itself. So when he swore that promise to David, he is

going to make it come to pass. So this Psalm becomes a kind of prophecy of the fact that one day the Messiah is going to come. And if you skip down to verse 26 and 28 of the Psalm that the Responsorial Psalm selects, it says this about the future Davidic king:

He shall cry to me, `Thou art my Father,
my God, and the Rock of my salvation.'
And I will make him the first-born,
the highest of the kings of the earth.
My steadfast love I will keep for him for ever,
and my covenant will stand firm for him.

So notice, what's one of the distinctive features of this future Davidic king? It is that he is going to call God his father. He is going to have a filial relationship with God. Alright, so that is the bridge from the Old Testament to the New Testament.

Finally, just a quick highlight about the second reading for today. Like the other weeks of Advent, in this case the reading is connected thematically to the others, and it's from Romans 16. It is a short passage at the end there, verses 25-27, that says this:

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed and through the prophetic writings is made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith -- to the only wise God be glory for evermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.

What does that have to do with the Fourth Sunday of Advent? Well look at that line there early on, "according to the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret for long ages." So what is this mystery? It's the mystery of how God is going to fulfill the prophecies. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, all these prophets of the Old Testament over and over are saying that one day God is going to come, God is going to save his people. One day God is going to raise up a shoot from the stump of Jesse — that was David's father — and that offspring of David, that shoot, is

going to grow out of a stump that looks like it is dead, just like David's kingdom looks like it's dead, but there's life in it. And that shoot is going to be the branch that will grow into a great tree, and that shoot is nothing less than the Davidic Messiah, the heir to David's throne, which is really what we are celebrating in the Advent season. I don't know how many of you make a Jesse tree during the Advent season. This is a custom and a tradition that my family loves to do. It is where you decorate a tree and you read certain scriptures each night and you look at certain symbols and images of salvation history and how God is preparing for the advent of Jesus all throughout the Old Testament. Well the reason we call that a Jesse tree is because Jesse was David's father, and so as all the readings for this Fourth Sunday of Advent show us, the fulfillment of God's promise through Christ isn't just the mystery of the incarnation, it's the mystery of David. It's the mystery of how the Davidic throne would be restored and how the Davidic kingdom would finally come into this world and bring into this world a kingdom of truth and justice and peace, and one that would not just last for a few centuries, but would last for all eternity.

I will close then with a quote from the Catechism of the Catholic Church once again. In paragraph 484, the Catechism of the Catholic Church says this about the Annunciation that we are recalling on this Fourth Sunday of Advent:

The Annunciation to Mary inaugurates “the fullness of time,” the time of the fulfillment of God’s promises and preparations.

So what does that tell us? Well it is just important for us to remember this because sometimes I think even in our lives we can feel like God has abandoned us, or God has forgotten us, or maybe we thought that He was going to do something and He didn't do it, that He has broken his promises. The reality is that God doesn't abandon us. He never abandons us. He never breaks his promises. And exhibit a to testify to that is his promise to David. Against all odds and against all visible appearances, where it looks like He has broken it, He comes in in the mystery of the incarnation and not only fulfills it, but transcends even the wildest imagination of what the Jewish people could've ever expected about what this kingdom and this son of God will be like. Because what He's giving us in Christ is the eternal son of God come as man, in order to save us not just from our political enemies, the Philistines or the Assyrians or the Babylonians, but to save us from sin and death,

and to establish a kingdom that is not earthly, but heavenly, and that will last for all eternity.