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Everybody is bustling, getting ready for Christmas. Did you ever wonder what the preparations for the first Christmas looked like from the vantage point of eternity? We have countless depictions of the Nativity, but images of the Trinity that go beyond shamrocks and geometric figures usually depict one old man, one young one (maybe on a cross), and a bird. We rarely see any image intimating that they can communicate, much less make plans together.

Today's reading from Hebrews invites us to think about the Trinity's own Christmas planning session. Perhaps the best visual image we have for this comes from the Russian iconographer Andrei Rublev. His famous icon, usually described as the Trinity or the "Hospitality of Abraham," depicts three figures seated together at table, gently but deeply involved in one another. Let this be in the back of your mind as you listen to Christ talking about the plan of the incarnation.

Christ looks to the Father and says, "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire." That may be fine as a discussion point in heaven, but it throws a mighty wrench into humanity's religious practices! From the Genesis story on, humans have used all sorts of sacrifices to make the gods or their God happy with them. Of course, God's rationale here may have something to do with the fact that the first sacrifice Adam's children offered led to murder.

As if to be sure that we in the audience hear the message clearly, Christ repeated the same message in other words: "In holocausts and sin offerings, you neither desired nor delighted in." That debunked centuries of religious practice. It undermined the entire economy of the Temple. It separated Christ and his followers from all religious traditions based on trying to buy God's favor.

This is why people during the first centuries thought of the Christians as atheists. They refused to propitiate the gods. Those who believed in those gods knew how dangerous that was: It could bring on really bad luck. But much worse, refusal to sacrifice signaled that the religion of the Christians had nothing to do with fear and that meant that nobody could control them. That was a dangerous brand of atheism.

When we go back to heaven's planning session for the original Christmas pageant, we need to listen to more of what was said. Christ says, "Sacrifice ... you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me." (The Hebrew text of the original psalm says "you dug out ears for me.") This takes us a step back from Cain and Abel to the creation stories. Christ is connecting the incarnation with creation itself! He is saying that God's rationale for creating was always to share life, to communicate. The reason for the Incarnation was to reemphasize that.

Finally, Christ's dialog begins to sound like his mother as he says: "Behold, I come to do your will." That is only a slight variation on "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord, may it be done to me according to your word."

This reading from the Letter to the Hebrews comes between Micah's prediction that a savior will come from the little town of Bethlehem and Luke's story of the meeting between the two expectant mothers, Mary and Elizabeth. These three readings communicate an element of the unexpected: A long tradition of sacrifice is demoted as a religious practice; Jerusalem is skipped over and a nowhere town is hailed as the place that will provide the savior; and women become the major actors in the story of the beginnings of the new covenant. The divine planners' Christmas surprise had a variety of dimensions!

After we have allowed our imaginations to wander through the scenes Hebrews and the other readings set for us, we can ask what it all tells us about our own celebration of Christmas 2,000 or so years after the first one? Our psalm response this Sunday is "Lord, make us turn to you, show us your face and we shall be saved." That may provide the key to the question of how to prepare for another celebration

of the Nativity of the Lord.

It is one thing to look at the crèche set, to sing “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” or to picture the scene of joy as Mary and Elizabeth meet, but the point of it is to ask what they show us about Emmanuel today. Pope Francis echoes Hebrews’ message when he calls us to say “a firm and clear no to violence” ([www.cruxnow.com/vatican/2018/02/02/](http://www.cruxnow.com/vatican/2018/02/02/)). The story of Bethlehem reminds us that God approaches us through the seemingly most insignificant. Elizabeth’s song and blessing of Mary and their parallel pregnancies remind us that we are created for joy and that we will find it to the extent that we join Mary and her son in saying “Behold, I come to do your will.”

### **MICAH 5:1-4a**

Micah the prophet was roughly a contemporary of Amos, Hosea and Isaiah. That they lived in a time when prophecy was flourishing in Israel was not exactly good news for the people. God sends prophets when people are sorely in need of a strong message to bring them back to their commitments. Prophets are not cut out to be cheerleaders or dealers in affirmation.

But in this case, Micah has words of encouragement for the little ones of Israel. In Micah’s day, people tended to be quite impressed with the Temple, Jerusalem and all the glitter. Micah set out to remind them that glory produced by human hands will not last forever.

Instead of focusing on Jerusalem like Isaiah does, Micah, a man from the country, talks about Bethlehem, a little nowhere place.

Tiny Bethlehem, a village beneath the notice of important people, is the sort of place the God of Israel tends to choose. It is rather ironic. People beg God for success, and when they do well, they may be grateful and recognize their well-being as grace. At the same time, revelation tells us that greatness does not attract God’s attention. The God of Israel is hooked on the little ones, the marginal people and places, the ones who cannot possibly win against the powers that be.

Micah quotes God as telling Bethlehem, “From you shall come forth for me the one who is to be ruler in Israel.” Subtly tucked into that prophecy, we hear just how deeply concerned God is with the fate of the people. It is not simply that God will send them a savior; God says that this savior will come for me. In a sense, God is

saying, "What happens for you, happens for me."

When Micah's audience heard this prophecy, they could not help but remember their great king, David. Unlike the handsome, accomplished Saul, David was just a kid, a tender of the flocks, when Samuel anointed him as the king to replace Saul (1 Samuel 16:13). Micah's promise about Bethlehem told them that after 300 years, God was still working for them.

King Micah prophesied about a would-be pastor whose strength would come from God. Those who had ears to hear would have realized that the prophecy of God's greatness reaching to the ends of the earth would be fulfilled in the same manner as God's choice of Bethlehem. Unlike the feats of the great ones of the world who care for their own, all of this would happen through and for the little ones.

### **PSALM 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19**

The verses we sing from Psalm 80 sound almost like a sincerely sorry but naughty child crying, "Help me be good!" When we sing, "Lord, make us turn to you!" it is as if we realize that the distractions and temptations around us are so great that we want God to outdo them and thus get our undivided attention (which indicates that we already want to belong to God).

With Christmas just a few days away, we call on God to be our shepherd and pull us back from the brink of all that leads us astray. Then, just as quickly as we called on God as shepherd, we sing to God as a vineyard owner. "Look, you planted us! You want us to grow! We are yours and we need your strength."

One verse builds on another as we express our easy familiarity with God. While we may have been given images of God on a throne surrounded by the cherubim, somehow, we have the audacity to say, "Step down! We need you here!"

This psalm is a wonderful Christmas song, a song of welcome to the God who comes to be among us. Praying it is a sacramental act in the sense that it involves us in a spiral of asking God to be with us because we already know how good it is that God is with us. Singing the song effects what it expresses and helps us to be ever more deeply in touch with our longing for God.

### **HEBREWS 10:5-10**

Today's reading from Hebrews presents itself as Christ's reflection before the incarnation. Although the author might not have used the same vocabulary as the Fathers of the Church, their ideas are similar: The second person of the Trinity is speaking to the Father (and the Spirit?) on the cusp of the Incarnation. We could picture this as a conversation taking place at the table of Rublev's famous icon of the Trinity.

In this selection, the Letter to the Hebrews gives us a reflection that combines the vantage points of the Gospel of John and those of Matthew and Luke's infancy narratives. John begins his Gospel saying, "In the beginning was the Word," and then goes on to the crucial moment, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14, NRSV). Hebrews makes us privy to Christ's thoughts prior to taking on the flesh that made him Jesus of Nazareth whose birth Matthew and Luke described with such simple, human details.

The words that the author of Hebrews put in Christ's mouth come from Psalm 40 which was considered David's own reflection on his vocation. In reality, it is far more appropriate to Jesus who predicted the end of sacrifice than to David who wanted to build a temple.

This reading reminds us of God's opinion about religious behavior. Anthropologists tell us that every culture has used sacrifice as a way to communicate with the gods. Sacrifice may be a gesture of worship, a way to atone for sin, or a symbolic act of communion. Sacrifice always acknowledges the inequality between the human and the divine and is humanity's attempt to please the gods in order to assure life and prosperity on earth. In sum, sacrifice is a deeply human attempt to communicate with God. The prophetic tradition and this selection from Hebrews present God's critique of sacrifice. In essence, God is saying, "You are trying to establish communication with me and ignoring how I have been communicating with you all along!"

Hebrews presents Christ as speaking the words of Psalm 40, declaring that the epoch of sacrifice was useless and has come to an end. Speaking for all of humanity, Christ says to the Father, "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire ... in holocausts and sin offerings you took no delight." Although those words may sound like a complaint, they are actually more like a discovery. Christ and the psalmist are speaking in the name of humanity saying, "We wanted to give you something, and then discovered that all along it was you who wanted to give something to us! This

body, this life is your gift. It gives us a way of communing with you.”

These five verses from Hebrews summarize a theology of the Incarnation. This reading invites us to imagine the Trinity in the work of creation and the incarnation of Christ. Hebrews tells us that the Incarnation is God’s way of revealing what it means to be human. Christ said “a body you prepared for me” so that I could say, “Here I am, I come to do your will.”

The last verse of the reading reminds us that the incarnation offers us as much change as it gave Christ. “By this ‘will,’ we have been consecrated through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” That indicates that sacrifice, good intentioned as it might be, is no better than a distraction from God’s plan for us. Like Christ, we have been given a body that allows us to love God and one another, that is, to enter into union with God.

This selection from Hebrews invites us to contemplate the Trinity planning the Incarnation. They know why they have made the plan. The question that remains is whether or not we will catch on.

### **LUKE 1:39-45**

Luke gives us the interesting and unexplained detail that Mary set out in haste to visit Elizabeth. This was no jog across town, but a trip estimated to be at least 80 miles long — and probably on foot. Details we don’t think about include the fact that she would certainly not have gone alone — that would have been far too dangerous to her newly precarious reputation as well as her physical safety. People traveled in groups on journeys, and when they headed toward Jerusalem, they often had a sense of making a pilgrimage. Mary’s trip would have easily taken at least eight days on foot — even if she kept up her hasty pace.

Mary’s traveling companions are not named. This is a woman’s story, signaled by the fact that she entered Zechariah’s house, but we hear only the words of the two women. Luke has already introduced the characters in this scene. Zachariah represents a divinely-silenced priesthood; he and his wife symbolize the best of a waning phase of Israel’s history. They are the Abraham and Sarah for their day. God is working wonders for and with them through the son in Elizabeth’s womb. Mary is the mother of the new covenant. Her pregnancy has nothing to do with human plans. Through her, God is doing something entirely new.

Demonstrating that the new is nothing but good news for the old, Luke tells us that Elizabeth's babe leapt in her womb when she heard Mary's greeting. Just as the prophet Jeremiah had been called before his birth, John first rejoiced in the savior from his mother's womb.

Elizabeth, acting as a prophet in her own right, pronounces the first three beatitudes of the Gospel tradition: "Blessed are you;" "Blessed the fruit of your womb;" and the most instructive of the three, "Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled." Elizabeth's first two beatitudes more or less repeat the angel Gabriel's greeting to Mary. The third is the hinge connecting the old and new covenants. Israel's vocation and struggle through the centuries had been to believe that God's promise would be fulfilled, to believe in God enough to give themselves to the promise. Mary committed herself to that promise with her vow, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to your word."

Perhaps Luke told us of Mary's haste because the times were fast changing. The child to be born of Mary would become the very fulcrum of history. The divine project that the Trinity was planning for the world would call forth every person willing to share Mary's beatitude. In our day as in hers, blessed are they who believe that what God has promised will be fulfilled.

## **Planning: Fourth Sunday of Advent**

By Lawrence Mick

Christmas is a wonderful feast. Most Christians look forward to it, probably more than they look forward to Easter. Planners and liturgical ministers might have other feelings, given the demands of multiple Masses and large crowds, many of whom only appear on the two big holidays.

It can be a challenge, too, to shift from this Fourth Sunday of Advent into Christmas mode in a day. Assuming Christmas Masses starting Monday afternoon or evening, there is not a lot of time to decorate and prepare. Consider asking parishioners at the last Advent Mass to stay and help with the decorating for Christmas so that the burden does not fall too heavily on just a few.

The disappointing part of Christmas is that so few people seem to appreciate the depth of meaning that it contains. It is far more than a peaceful birth story heightened by angelic choirs. Christmas celebrates the presence of God in our world and in our daily life. It is not an event to be celebrated for one day and then tossed aside with the dried-up Christmas tree. It is a reality that we should celebrate every day of our lives.

What can you do to help those who show up for the Christmas Masses to appreciate at least a little more of the wonder of God's continuing presence among us and within us? Can you craft prayer texts that pray for the grace to remember Christ's presence with us every day? Can preachers find ways to lead the assembly into some deeper insight and awareness?

Some of that could be offered to worshipers this Sunday. Think of the psalm refrain: "Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved." Can Sunday's preaching and petitions lead people to look for the face of Christ every day in every person they meet? That is a key part of the message of Christmas — that God — the Divine — is to be found in the human.

This is a difficult challenge because people come with such limited understanding of the significance of the Incarnation. This is not a matter of railing against the commercialism of the season, though that is obviously an obstacle. Rather, we need to find ways to help people recognize how much more this feast means and how that deeper meaning can help them in living the faith all year.

Preachers, of course, have the best opportunity to share such insights, but planners can shape petitions that reflect them, too. And look for songs that go beyond a sleeping baby in a manger to express some of the cosmic significance of this birth.

## **Prayers: Fourth Sunday of Advent**

By [Joan DeMerchant](#)

### **Introduction**

These two short days before Christmas remind us of God's powerful promises on the brink of fulfillment. We are not the only ones waiting and wondering what is yet to come, especially in these uneasy times. We have the perspective of history on how earlier promises bore fruit, as well as our own yearnings. Do we believe that there are promises still to be fulfilled, and if so, how do we demonstrate that?

### **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, your coming was the fulfillment of great expectation: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, your mother Mary and Elizabeth were open to God's promises: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to be open to promises that are yet to be fulfilled: Lord, have mercy.

### **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** We pray, my friends, for minds and hearts that are filled with expectation.

**Minister** For the church that we may show the world what it means to be an expectant, yearning people, we pray:

- For all those whose yearning for something more is shattered by war, violence, racism or poverty and for the will and wisdom to cooperate with others to address these pervasive issues, we pray:
- For those whose expectations are focused on wealth or status, material things or power, and for the ability to remain hopeful despite life's limitations or setbacks, we pray:
- For those who do not have the means to celebrate this holiday and for all who support those in need during this season, we pray:
- For the ability, like Elizabeth, to recognize Jesus in unexpected people and circumstances, especially those where we would least expect to find God, we pray:
- For the generosity to attend to those among us who yearn for healing, companionship or meaning as we enter into the heart of this holiday season, we

pray:

**Presider** God, for whom no one is too insignificant or too unworthy, we are bold enough to assume that your promises of salvation, peace and blessing are meant for us and for all yearning people. Keep our hope alive and show us how to share that hope with those who doubt you. We pray in the name of Jesus, whose coming is imminent. Amen.

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