

The Newness of God

Corinna Laughlin

“Whenever God reveals himself, he brings newness—God always brings newness—and demands our complete trust: Noah, mocked by all, builds an ark and is saved; Abram leaves his land with only a promise in hand; Moses stands up to the might of Pharaoh and leads his people to freedom; the Apostles, huddled fearfully in the Upper Room, go forth with courage to proclaim the Gospel. . . . Let us ask ourselves today: Are we open to ‘God’s surprises’? Or are we closed and fearful before the newness of the Holy Spirit? Do we have the courage to strike out along the new paths which God’s newness sets before us?” (http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130519_omelia-pentecoste_en.html)

The words of Pope Francis last Pentecost are an apt reminder at the beginning of the liturgical year. What could be newer than the seasons that lie ahead of us? In Advent, we open ourselves to the incredible newness that Christ’s Second Coming will bring—new heavens and a new earth—and we seek a new and deeper awareness of his abiding presence in the world. And what could be newer than Christmas, when we stand in wonder before the mystery, ever ancient, ever new, of the Word-made-flesh in a newborn child?

But newness is probably not the first thing that comes to mind at this time of year: quite the reverse! The “holiday season” is so overladen with traditions that uncovering the meaning of the season—being surprised by Christmas—can feel like an archaeological dig. Perhaps this year, one way to open ourselves



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During this Advent, we can seek to look anew at the reign of God that John the Baptist and Isaiah paint in the Scripture readings of the season.

to “God’s newness,” as Pope Francis calls it, is to listen with new ears to the prophetic preaching that comes our way abundantly during these holy days of Advent, Christmas, and Ordinary Time in the winter.

We will hear much preaching from the prophets, especially Isaiah. With incredible poetic imagination, Isaiah doesn’t simply talk about the reign of God. He paints it, with

imagery of light, life, healing, and abundance. Isaiah challenges us to rethink our sense of what—and who—is important, reminding us over and over that God’s chosen ones are not the powerful or the strong. Isaiah called upon the people of his time to question those “transient structures which have lost their capacity for openness to what is new” of which Pope Francis has spoken (*ibid.*). As we listen to Isaiah’s words during the coming weeks, we will be forced to do the same.

The preaching of John the Baptist resounds again and again during this time of year, not only in Advent but in Christmas Time and beyond. His preaching is terse, powerful, hard to listen to: he is unblinking in his condemnations, at the same time that he invites all to come to the waters of Baptism, preparing the way for the Lord by calling all to repentance.

And there is the preaching of Saint Paul. He preached to people not unlike us: people who took their faith seriously, yet who were unsure of how to live with an awareness of the coming of Christ. If new heavens and a new earth were around the corner, did the old heavens and the old earth still matter? (Paul’s answer is a resounding yes.) If Christ’s coming was delayed from

day to day, should we go back to our old ways of doing things? (Paul’s answer is a resounding no!)

This year, what if we listened anew to these great preachers? What if we confronted our fears, questioned our routines, and—at the invitation of Pope Francis—gained “the courage to strike out along the new paths that God’s newness sets before us?” This is the newness of Advent: “a new coming, a new call from the one who is always present . . . a new answer, a new act of decision,” in the words of Dame Aemiliana Lohr (*The Mass through the Year: Advent to Palm Sunday*, p. 5).

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT (DECEMBER 1)

Scriptures

Isaiah’s prophetic office extended through turbulent and devastating years in the history of Israel, from the death of King Uzziah, to the siege of Jerusalem by Assyria. To a people who knew little except war and its incredible human cost, the prophet gave a vision of “days to come” (Isaiah 2:2), when all the nations would come to the house of the Lord, to learn his wisdom and walk in his ways. God, not military might, will be the ultimate judge in the disputes among the nations.

Psalm 122 is sung on consecutive Sundays—it is the psalm for the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, in Year C, and the psalm for the First Sunday of Advent in Year A. Different aspects of the rich poetry of the psalm emerge on each of these Sundays. Last week, the emphasis was on Christ as the Son of David, the king. Today, with Isaiah’s vision of peace before our eyes, we listen especially to the end of the psalm, with its prayer for peace in Jerusalem.

The Second Reading is full of contrasts: sleeping and waking; darkness and light; flesh and spirit. Saint Paul urges the Romans to a lively awareness of “the time,” “the hour” (13:11). It is still night, but the dawn of the Lord is near, and we are to be people of that new day. This sense of the imminence of the Lord’s coming made some lazy (see 2 Thessalonians 3:10–12). But Saint Paul says that this awareness of the advent should make us more alert, and even more intent upon love and acts of virtue.

In the Gospel, Jesus warns his disciples not to expect any advance notice when the day of the Lord comes. His advent will be so sudden that people working side by side will be separated. Jesus uses two frightening comparisons to describe his coming—Noah’s flood and the thief in the night. The coming of the Lord is not safe, or tame; it is not business as usual. But what we need to do is simple: “be prepared” (Matthew 24:44). And how do we prepare? By living in the light.

Prayers

In the Collect, we ask that we may run joyfully to meet Christ when he comes. We can meet his coming with joy only if our lives are filled with “righteous deeds.” We “walk amid passing



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From the Collect on the Second Sunday of Advent, we understand that Advent is both about Christ’s coming and our going to meet him.

things” (Prayer after Communion), in the darkness that Saint Paul spoke of, and yet we have the Eucharist, which teaches us to love heaven (Prayer after Communion) and can bring us “eternal redemption” (Prayer over the Offerings).

During the first weeks of Advent, Preface I of Advent is used. This Preface sweeps from past to present to future. “Long ago” God formed a plan for the salvation of humanity, and when Jesus took on our flesh at the Incarnation he fulfilled that plan, opening “for us the way to eternal salvation.” That past is our future, for we “watch for that day” and “dare to hope” in God’s “great promise.”

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT (DECEMBER 8)

The Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception is displaced, not replaced, when December 8th falls on a Sunday. We celebrate the Second Sunday of Advent today and the Immaculate Conception tomorrow. This year, the Immaculate Conception is not a holiday of obligation in the United States.

The Entrance Antiphon sets the tone for today’s liturgy: “O people of Sion, behold, / the Lord will come to save the nations, / and the Lord will make the glory of his voice heard / in the joy of your heart.” There is anticipation, joy, and awe, and there is the realization that the Lord comes not for a few, but to “save the nations.” All these themes echo in our readings today.

Scriptures

We hear another splendid vision from Isaiah. The once-flourishing tree of Jesse—the people of Israel—have been reduced to a mere “stump.” But from this death, new life arises, and the “shoot” that sprouts is filled with the Lord’s spirit. The familiar imagery of the peaceful mountain, where wolf and lamb are friends, where “the cow and the bear shall be neighbors,” is full

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of delight. But of course, this reading is not about the animal kingdom: it is about God's Kingdom. The imagery is of enemies becoming friends at the coming of the Lord, who "shall judge the poor with justice, / and decide aright for the land's afflicted." Justice—God's justice—leads to peace. This is the task of the One who comes—to care for the poor.

The psalm takes up that theme: "Justice shall flourish in his time, / and fullness of peace for ever" (Refrain). Psalm 72 is a prayer for the king, the leader chosen by God, who cares for "the poor," "the afflicted," "the lowly," and whose blessing embraces "all the tribes of the earth."

The Second Reading continues the emphasis on the universal mission of Christ. Saint Paul urges the Romans to have hope, which is the fruit of "endurance and encouragement." And then he reminds them that Jesus did not come just to a few, but to all—to Gentiles as well as to God's chosen people. And thus he calls on them to "welcome one another . . . as Christ welcomed you." This is the task of the Christian: to hope with the hope Christ gives, to welcome with the broad welcome of Christ.

The Gospel is Matthew's vivid account of the preaching of John the Baptist. John has fierce words for the Pharisees and the Sadducees, those sticklers for tradition and the Torah. All that will avail them on the day of the Lord, he says, is "good fruit as evidence of your repentance." It is not enough to say "we have Abraham as our father," for God's power "can raise up children of Abraham from these stones." And that is exactly what happens when Christ comes and opens the way for the Gentiles to become God's children by adoption. Obedience to God is more important than bloodlines.

Prayers

The Collect imagines the Church on a journey to meet Christ. We pray that "no earthly undertaking" will delay us, but that we will "set out in haste" toward Christ, and, taught by "heavenly wisdom," be admitted to his company. Advent is not only about Christ's coming; it is also about our going to meet him.

In the Prayer over the Offerings we acknowledge that we have only "humble prayers and offerings" and "have no merits" with which to impress God. And so we ask God to supply our weakness with his mercy.

The Prayer after Communion is a prayer for discernment, that we may have wisdom to judge "things of earth" and to cling to "things of heaven."

IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY (DECEMBER 9)

The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary is a solemnity well suited to the Advent season. God chooses Mary, keeping her free from sin from the very moment of her conception, and thus he prepares the way for his Son.

Scriptures

Mary is the new Eve. In the First Reading we hear once again the story of the old Eve. Adam blames Eve; Eve blames the serpent. These are the results of sin: separation from God; separation

from other people; shame. The passage in which God punishes the serpent (and, later, Adam and Eve) is thought to be even more ancient than the rest of the chapter. On one level, it is a story of origins, like those of so many ancient cultures: it explains why snakes slide on their bellies and why human beings must work for their bread. But read through the lens of the Gospels, it tells another story. Eve said no; Mary will say yes. The woman's offspring will strike at the serpent's head—Jesus will destroy Satan's power. The Fathers of the early Church loved to make this comparison: "the knot of Eve's disobedience was untied by Mary's obedience: what the virgin Eve bound through her disbelief, Mary loosened by her faith" (St. Irenaeus).

After the reading, the psalm refrain comes as a surprise: "Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous deeds." In the Christian tradition, we do not regret the fall forever; we rejoice in it: "O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a Redeemer!" the Church sings in the Easter *Exsultet*.

In the passage from Ephesians, Saint Paul reminds us that we were all "destined," "chosen," (1:5, 11) to become God's adopted children in Christ. The reading does not mention Mary, but these words apply in a particular way to her who was chosen "before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him" (1:4). We, too, were chosen before time began, for a special purpose: "that we might exist for the praise of his glory" (1:12).

Mary's life story is really Jesus's life story. We see that clearly in the Gospel reading, which gives us the account of the conception not of Mary, but of Jesus! In this context, the words of the angel to Mary—"full of grace"—help us to understand what it means to have been immaculately conceived: Mary is full of grace, full of God, without room for anything that does not belong to God. Mary's freedom from sin, her transparency, does not take away her free will, but rather strengthens it. In the presence of God's messenger, Mary is "greatly troubled" as Adam and Eve were, but she does not hide herself (Luke 1:29). Instead, she is able to ask questions, to decide, and to say, "I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word" (1:38).

Prayers

The Collect expresses the meaning of this solemnity. God let Mary share beforehand in the Paschal Mystery of Christ: she was preserved "from every stain / by virtue of the Death of your Son." We in turn ask to be cleansed from our sins, that we may come into God's presence. The Prayer over the Offerings and the Prayer after Communion relate closely to the Collect. All three point to Mary's sinlessness and petition that we might be freed from our sins.

The proper Preface for this solemnity is subtitled "the Mystery of Mary and the Church." In Mary, conceived without sin, we see "the beginning of the Church," for Mary is the image of that "beautiful Bride without spot or wrinkle." Mary is different from us, "above all others," and yet she is close to us: "an advocate of grace / and a model of holiness."

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT (DECEMBER 15)

Joy is the prevailing theme in the readings for this Sunday, called “Gaudete Sunday” from the Latin Entrance Antiphon “*Gaudete in Domino semper*,” “Rejoice in the Lord always.” The readings make clear why we rejoice in the Lord: because he is the Lord of life and of justice.

Scriptures

The third of the four great readings we hear from Isaiah on the Advent Sundays is a vision of a world transformed by the presence of God. The desert rejoices, the barren land blooms with flowers, and the people of God rejoice at his coming. The coming of the Lord brings judgment and healing—the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the mute speak. God’s presence heralds freedom, as all the captives are “ransomed . . . and enter Zion singing, / crowned with everlasting joy.”

Psalm 146 speaks of the faithfulness of God, whose promise to his people is healing, protection, abundance, and justice.

The reading from the Letter of James urges patience. The Christian awaiting the Lord is like the farmer who waits for the harvest, not reaping until both “the early and the late rains” have fallen. The patience with which we await the coming of God extends to each other as well—we must not “complain . . . about one another,” because that would be to judge one another, and “the Judge” is at the gates. Our patience must be the patience of the prophets, who look to the time when God will bring about justice.

Saint James alludes to the hard fate of prophets, and we see that fate in the Gospel, where John’s bold words have brought him to prison. Hearing of the deeds of Jesus, John sends his disciples to ask if he is the Messiah. Jesus responds with words that allude to today’s reading from Isaiah. Jesus is the one Isaiah foretold; Jesus is “the one who is to come.” And then Jesus says two amazing things: John is a prophet—and the greatest of the prophets—but “the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” Something new is happening, and for those who live in this moment—for us!—there is blessing beyond imagining.

Prayers

Every year at Advent we acknowledge both “advents,” both comings of the Lord: we recall his first coming, at Christmas, and we look to his Second Coming. The Entrance Antiphon speaks of the Second Coming: “the Lord is near” (Philippians 4:5). The Collect speaks of the first: “your people / faithfully await the feast of the Lord’s Nativity.” We pray that we may attain the salvation we celebrate “with solemn worship”: it is the prayer we offer every time we gather for the solemn remembering that is the liturgy.

We pray that our celebration of the Eucharist may accomplish in us the “saving work” of God which began “in sacred mystery” (Prayer over the Offerings). The heavenly food we receive has power to cleanse us and make us ready for the “coming feasts,” for Christmas (Prayer after Communion).

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT (DECEMBER 22)

“Drop down dew from above, you heavens, / and let the clouds rain down the Just One; / let the earth be opened and bring forth a Savior.” The rich imagery of pregnancy and birth in the Entrance Antiphon sets the tone for this Sunday’s liturgy.

Scriptures

In the First Reading, God speaks to Ahaz the king, telling him to “ask for a sign” (7:11). Dangers surround Israel, but God is with his people. And yet Ahaz, full of doubt, trusting to armies and allies rather than relying on God, refuses to do what God has asked. Worse still, he refuses on religious grounds: “I will not tempt the LORD!” (7:12). And so Isaiah prophesies that a virgin will give birth to “Emmanuel,” a name that means “God is with us.”

Psalm 24 was a song for a procession of the ark into the Temple of Jerusalem. For us, this psalm of the presence of God is a song for the entry of God into the world in Jesus Christ: “Let the Lord enter” (Refrain).

The Second Reading gives us the beginning of the Letter to the Romans, as Saint Paul greets the Christian community there and explains who he is, his mission, and who called him to this ministry: Jesus, “descended from David according to the flesh” (Romans 1:3).

Jesus’s descent from David is traced through that of “Joseph, son of David,” husband of Mary (Matthew 1:20). Like Ahaz in the First Reading, Joseph is presented with an extraordinary challenge, but, unlike Ahaz, Joseph responds with faith. His is “the obedience of faith” spoken of by Saint Paul in the Second Reading (Romans 1:5).

Prayers

The Collect touches on our participation in the entire Paschal Mystery. We, the whole human family, have known the Incarnation “by the message of an Angel.” We pray that we may come to share in Christ’s Passion, so that we may also know his Resurrection. We are following Christ, from Incarnation to Resurrection.

The Prayer over the Offerings continues the wonderful imagery of pregnancy of the Entrance Antiphon and the readings. The Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary, and she became pregnant with the Son of God. When the Holy Spirit overshadows the gifts upon the altar, they become the Body and Blood of Christ. It is the same Spirit!

Preface II of Advent is used today. This Preface emphasizes “the twofold expectation of Christ”: with Mary and John the Baptist, “we rejoice / at the mystery of his Nativity.” With all of creation, we watch for his Second Coming.

In the Prayer after Communion, we pray that we may be ready and eager for the coming feast of the Nativity of Christ.



The Nativity of the Lord is one solemnity with a range of distinct celebrations, beginning with the Vigil on Christmas Eve and continuing with the Masses on Christmas Day, each of which reveals facets of the mystery of the Incarnation.

THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD (DECEMBER 25)

So many of our Christmas traditions are about surprises in one way or another. There are the gifts wrapped in paper, the Christmas crackers full of jokes, toys, and noisemakers, and the Christmas puddings with secret goodies inside. A deep wisdom is here, because Christmas is the day of surprises, when God turns expectations upside down, becoming incarnate—becoming hidden—in a tiny, vulnerable newborn child. This year, may the season of surprises surprise us anew!

The Nativity of the Lord is one solemnity with a range of distinct celebrations. It begins with the Vigil on Christmas Eve, which is not simply an anticipated Mass of Christmas Day but a unique celebration, with its own readings and prayers that present one facet of the Christmas feast. The other three Masses—the Mass during the Night, Mass at Dawn, and Mass during the Day—continue to reveal facets of the mystery of the Incarnation.

Scriptures

The Lectionary provides a complete set of readings for each of the four Christmas Masses. Each set includes a passage from the prophet Isaiah and an account of Christ's birth, beginning with Matthew's genealogy at the Vigil, continuing with Luke's account (begun at Midnight, continued at Dawn), and culminating in John's proclamation of the Word made flesh. While the readings for the Vigil do not transfer to Christmas Day—they are readings of anticipation, which look to the morrow—the readings for Christmas Day are flexible, and parishes have “the

option of choosing from one or another of the three sets of readings according to the pastoral needs of each congregation” (Lectionary 13).

At the Vigil Mass: The readings for the Vigil Mass continue the themes of Advent as the end of the Church's long vigil draws near. The reading from Isaiah looks to the dawning of a new era, when the Lord will come to his people. The imagery is bold: God will marry the people he has created, living with them in a loving covenant. On Christmas Eve, we read this passage in light of the Incarnation. God, in Jesus Christ, became one flesh with humanity in a marvelous marriage of the divine and the human.

Psalm 89 emphasizes the human roots of the Messiah. The psalmist recalls the covenant God made with David, when he promised to bring forth from David's line a king—a “son”—whose rule would last forever.

It is quite rare that we hear the Acts of the Apostles outside of Easter, but today our Second Reading gives us

Paul's sermon at Antioch, as he comments on the psalm we just heard. Speaking to a mixed assembly of Jews and Gentiles, Paul shows how Jesus is the fulfillment of the promise recounted in Psalm 89. With its account of the origins of Jesus, and the forerunner, John the Baptist, this reading is a summary of the Advent season.

The Acclamation before the Gospel reminds us that we are still keeping vigil—we have not yet arrived: “Tomorrow the wickedness of the earth will be destroyed.”

Matthew, Luke, and John all begin their Gospel accounts with the Incarnation, but each in a quite different way. Matthew gives the genealogy of Jesus, beginning with Abraham and winding through generation after generation to Joseph, the foster father of the Lord. The rhythms of Matthew's genealogy are an insistent reminder that Jesus is both human and divine. His birth record includes the names of sinners as well as saints. Jesus was born into a real human family, a family not unlike our families, with their black sheep and their troubled marriages, their heroes and their history.

The shorter form of the reading skips the genealogy to go straight to the narrative of the angel's visit to Joseph in a dream, which, in this Year A, we heard just last Sunday. Joseph has a significant role to play in salvation history. It is through Joseph that Jesus finds a place in the family of David, and it is Joseph who gives Jesus his name, which means “God saves.”

Mass during the Night: In the readings for the Mass during the Night we move from future to present, from “will be” to “is.” The coming we have watched for through the weeks of

Advent is now celebrated in the present tense. This is the paradox of our faith: Jesus came among us long ago. He is with us always, according to his promise. And yet, we continue to await his coming.

The reading from Isaiah begins with poetic imagery of light and darkness: “the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light” (Isaiah 9:1). Later in the reading, we realize what kind of darkness this is: the darkness of a world caught up in violence and the cruelty of war. The newborn child will be a “Prince of Peace,” not war (9:5), and he will bring justice to the people, even as a light shines in the darkness. The last words of the reading tell us how all this will happen: “The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this!” (9:6). God wants to save us and bring us peace.

Psalm 96 is one of the psalms most associated with Christmas because it speaks of God’s coming into the world. This is such good news that even the trees should “exult” (Psalm 96:12). Many favorite artworks depicting the Christmas mystery enter into the spirit of this psalm, with smiling beasts who seem somehow far more aware than we of the marvelous Presence in their midst.

The brief reading from St. Paul’s letter to Titus reminds us that God’s grace “has appeared” among us in Jesus Christ, but that now we are in an in-between time, a time of waiting (Titus 2:11). This is an active type of waiting: we are to live “temperately, justly, and devoutly,” “eager to do what is good” (2:12, 14).

Each year at the Mass during the Night the Church proclaims Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus. The narrative begins with an earthly king, Caesar Augustus, and ends with a heavenly one. The Emperor has called for an “enrollment” (probably something like a census). All of Israel is on the move, and Bethlehem is so crowded that Mary and Joseph cannot find lodging except in a stable. The birth of Jesus happens quietly, and, though angels herald his coming, they appear to shepherds, in the dark of night, not to the great rulers of the age. Jesus is born poor among the poor, and only to the poor is given the mysterious sign by which they will recognize their Messiah: he will be lying in a manger. Jesus has come to be food for his people.

Mass at Dawn: If we think of the four Masses of Christmas as parts of one great whole, like the movements in a symphony, then the Mass at Dawn is like the fast-paced third movement. The readings are short and pithy, and the Gospel is full of motion as the shepherds react to the good news announced during the night: Christ is born for us.

The reading from Isaiah was spoken to a people living in exile. The Lord comes to a broken world, to heal it, and to a broken people, to save and redeem them.

Psalm 97, with its Christmas refrain, urges us to see in the light of Christmas morning an image of the mystery we celebrate, for in the birth of Christ, a light has shone on the whole earth.

St. Paul’s letter to Titus reminds us that Jesus, the very embodiment of “the kindness and generous love of God” (3:4), was born for us not because we deserve him, but because God loves us. It is by our Baptism, “the bath of rebirth,” that we are sharers in the mystery of God-made-flesh. Baptism will be a

recurrent theme during Christmas Time, right up until the season ends with the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

The reading from Luke picks up exactly where last night’s reading left off. The shepherds, having heard the good news from the angels, hasten to Bethlehem. They find everything just as the angel said and then go home again, glorifying God. Jesus is born for us: Mary and Joseph share him with the shepherds, and the shepherds in turn make known to everyone the message they heard from the angel. Grace is given to be shared. Jesus, silent and helpless in the manger, is already mysteriously leading people to his Father.

Mass during the Day: With the Mass of Christmas Day, the great symphony finds a majestic conclusion. We move from the action-packed narratives of Matthew and Luke to the solemn Prologue to the Gospel according to John, which views the Incarnation from a cosmic perspective.

The reading from Isaiah begins with a memorable glimpse of the feet of a messenger as he crosses the mountains. His feet are beautiful because of the good tidings the messenger carries: God comes to restore, to renew, to redeem. This saving action is not just for a few; it is for the whole earth.

The refrain to Psalm 98 offers an insistent reminder that God’s “saving power” reaches to “the ends of the earth.” The psalm praises the God of the Jewish people, who “has remembered his kindness and faithfulness toward the house of Israel,” and recognizes that God’s salvation is not for one people, but for all.

The reading from Hebrews affirms that with the coming of Christ, we are in a new moment. In the past, God spoke through the prophets. Now, through Jesus, God speaks in a new way, for Jesus is “the very imprint of his being,” as we profess in the Creed—God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God.

In his account of the Incarnation, John does not mention angels or shepherds, or even Mary and Joseph. Instead, he speaks the language of poetry. He begins with the same words we find in Genesis: “In the beginning.” With Jesus, everything is new: in the Incarnation, God brings about a new creation. Jesus is the one through whom everything was created in the beginning; and when he became flesh, it is as if God said “let there be light” a second time. In him, we too are re-created, reborn of God.

Prayers

The prayers and prefaces of the Christmas Masses are full of imagery of light and words of joy, just as we might expect in this season of grace. But there are other themes that we might not expect. There is the theme of mystery: we “have known the mysteries of his light on earth” (Collect, Mass during the Night), and we pray “that we may come to know with fullness of faith / the hidden depths of this mystery” (Prayer after Communion, Mass at Dawn). Christmas is seen as a beginning—not of Christ’s earthly life, but of our heavenly life: “you make manifest the beginnings of our redemption” (Prayer over the Offerings, Vigil Mass); here God “inaugurated for us the fullness of divine worship” (Prayer over the Offerings, Mass during the Day). As we

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celebrate the feast of Christ's Nativity, we do well to remember that it is we who are born: "the Savior of the world, born this day, / is the author of divine generation for us" (Prayer after Communion, Mass during the Day).

FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY OF JESUS, MARY, AND JOSEPH (DECEMBER 29)

The First Reading is drawn from Sirach, one of the Wisdom books of the Old Testament. This reading gives us a group of teachings that urge obedience and respect for parents. The authority—and the responsibility—of parents are God-given. Therefore, to obey parents is to acknowledge God, who will richly reward such obedience with good gifts. The reading ends, touchingly, with a reminder to children to care for and respect their parents when they are no longer able to care for themselves.

Psalm 128 echoes the First Reading. God rewards those who obey him; and what is the reward? Family life—a table surrounded by husband, wife, and children. The greatest blessing God can bestow is a life lived with and for others.

The Second Reading from Colossians is written, like most of Saint Paul's letters, to a community struggling to live the Christian life. Paul urges them to live in mutual responsibility, "bearing with one another, forgiving one another" (3:13)—each looking out for the other and letting Christ's peace flourish in their midst. The short form of the reading omits the passage that speaks more specifically of the relationship among husbands, wives, and children.

The Gospel recounts the flight into Egypt. We have seen, in the Christmas Gospel readings, a repeated emphasis on the poverty of Jesus. The Holy Family is forced to flee into Egypt, pursued by the murderous intentions of Herod. Joseph, obedient to the angel's command, leads his young family to safety, but also to exile. The Holy Family endured what so many families endure today, especially those who live in places torn by violence, prejudice, or famine. Like them, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph left their homeland, trusting only in God and in each other.

Prayers

The prayers for today seek the blessings of charity and peace in the midst of life's troubles. We look to the Holy Family for a "shining example" (Collect); we ask their intercession for our families (Prayer over the Offerings); and we hope to "share their company for ever" in heaven by imitating them on earth.

It would be appropriate to include a blessing for families at Mass today. Two options can be found in the *Book of Blessings* (65–66), which could be used at the end of the Prayer of the Faithful, or as a Prayer over the People at the conclusion of Mass.

THE SOLEMNITY OF MARY, THE HOLY MOTHER OF GOD (JANUARY 1)

January 1 is the most ancient Marian solemnity in the Roman calendar. It honors Mary as *theotokos* or "Mother of God," the title accorded her at the Council of Ephesus in 431. January 1 is also the octave day of Christmas, and, according to Jewish custom, boys were circumcised and named eight days after their

birth (cf. Genesis 17:12, Leviticus 12:2–5). For centuries, this aspect of today's observance dominated, though its Marian origins persisted in the antiphons, especially at the Liturgy of the Hours. With the Second Vatican Council, the ancient meaning was restored, and the "Circumcision of the Lord" became "Mary, the Holy Mother of God."

January 1 also marks the World Day of Prayer for Peace and, in the West, New Year's Day. The liturgy makes no reference to this fact, and although *The Roman Missal* includes prayers for the beginning of the civil year, there is also a rubric indicating that they may not be used on this day.

Scriptures

Given the origins of today's solemnity, it is no surprise that the idea of naming looms large in the readings. In the reading from Numbers, the Lord gives to Aaron and all the priests a special prayer that invokes God's name over the people. The prayer is a threefold blessing, asking God's protection and peace for the community. God's very name is a blessing.

Psalm 67, with its prayer that God will "let his face shine upon us" (Psalm 67:2), echoes the language of Aaron's blessing.

The short, dense second reading from Galatians might be considered as St. Paul's telling of the Christmas story. There are no shepherds or wise men, but the key elements are here: the "fullness of time" had arrived (4:4)—God had prepared the way and made all things ready. Jesus was "born of a woman" (4:4)—through Mary, he received human flesh. And he was "born under the law" (4:4)—he was a child of the covenant, a relationship that was sealed by his circumcision on this eighth day after his birth. All of this happened for our sake, so that we might be slaves no longer, but rather adopted children, heirs of God, with Christ himself.

The Gospel is the continuation of the infancy narrative from Luke. It shows a movement from the extraordinary to the ordinary. The shepherds tell everyone what the angels said about Jesus, and Mary treasures their words in her heart. But then the shepherds go home again, and the child is circumcised and named like every other Jewish boy. Jesus is truly God and truly human. And that is why we dare to address Mary, who is called "Mother of God," as our mother, too.

Prayers

There are two options for the Entrance Antiphon. The first is especially interesting because it is non-scriptural—it is based on a poem by Sedulius (who in turn borrowed from Virgil's *Aenid*). Both antiphons speak of the birth of a great King, whose rule will extend over earth and heaven, through all time. The prayers for today speak of the kind of mother Mary is: one whose "fruitful virginity" (Collect) brought us the gift of salvation. Through her motherhood, "we glory in the beginnings of . . . grace" (Prayer over the Offerings). She is the Mother of God, as we profess in the very name of this solemnity, and she is "Mother of your Son and Mother of the Church" (Prayer after Communion).

THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD (JANUARY 5)

The Epiphany of the Lord is one of the great feasts of the Church's year. Traditionally celebrated on January 6, the twelfth day after Christmas, it is so important that in many countries, including the United States, it is transferred to the nearest Sunday. At Christmas, we celebrate the Word becoming flesh. At the Epiphany, we celebrate the news getting out—the revelation of this amazing reality to the world.

Scriptures

The readings emphasize that the Savior is born for all people, Jews and Gentiles alike. The poetry of Isaiah begins with Jerusalem—“Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has come” (60:1). This light that shines over Jerusalem becomes a beacon light for the world. As the reading continues, the prophet sees people of every land drawn by that great light.

Psalm 72 is a prayer for a king whose rule lasts forever, and whose reign is justice and peace. This king, with his special care for the poor and the afflicted, will be obeyed not just by one nation, but “all nations shall serve him” (Psalm 72:11). Notice the allusion to kings from far-off lands, bringing gifts.

Saint Paul has glimpsed the mystery of God's grace, freely given not only to Israel but to the Gentiles. God gives his grace abundantly: the Gentiles will not be second-class citizens, but “co-heirs,” equals (Ephesians 3:6).

Like the great light of Isaiah's prophecy, the star described by Matthew shines over Bethlehem, yet draws “magi from the east” (2:1) who come to Jerusalem in search of a king. Herod is shaken. How can there be a “newborn king” (2:2)? Is he not the king? Who can this be, who even at his birth has won the homage of these strangers from far away? The Gospel account contrasts earthly kingship, which is jealous, unsure of itself, arbitrary, and cruel, with the new kingship of Christ, who is vulnerable and helpless, a newborn child in his mother's lap. Herod's court is full of intrigue; but the “court” of this new king is a place of joy and prayerful homage.

Prayers

The beautiful Entrance Antiphon for the Vigil Mass, from the prophet Baruch (5:5), is echoed at the beginning of Eucharistic Prayer III: “Arise, Jerusalem, and look to the East / and see your children gathered from the rising to the setting of the sun.”

The prayers for Epiphany are full of wonderful echoes of the Gospel. The magi were led to Christ by the light of a star. We pray that God's light may shine in our hearts, to lead us “through the shadows of this world” to the light of heaven, “our eternal home” (Collect, Vigil), where we hope to behold “the beauty of your sublime glory” (Collect, Mass during the Day). We ask God



The themes of light and revelation link the Baptism of the Lord to the Christmas cycle of feasts.

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to look upon the offering we make, “not gold or frankincense or myrrh,” but the one whom those gifts proclaimed: Christ himself (Prayer over the Offerings, Mass during the Day). At the Vigil Mass, the Prayer after Communion alludes to the star that led the Magi to the infant Christ and to the precious gifts they brought him. We ask that “the star of [God's] justice” may shine in our minds, and that we may regard our faith as our greatest treasure. The lovely Prayer after Communion for the Mass during the Day asks for the guidance of “heavenly light,” so that we may clearly see, reverence, and love the great mystery in which we participate when we celebrate the Eucharist.

The Preface of the Epiphany expresses the marvelous exchange that we recall over and over again in the prayers of Christmas Time: God has become one of us so that we might become like him. At Epiphany, Christ appears “in our mortal nature” and renews us “by the glory of his immortal nature.”

FEAST OF THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD (JANUARY 12)

The Baptism of the Lord marks the end of Christmas Time and the beginning of Ordinary Time. Its themes of light and revelation link it to the Christmas cycle of feasts. Jesus's baptism also stands first in the sequence of readings about his teachings, healings, and miracles that characterize Ordinary Time.

Scriptures

The reading from Isaiah is part of a long meditation on the servant of the Lord. He will come quietly and gently—so gently that even the frail reed that is already bent will not be broken, and

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the wick that is already smoldering will not be put out. And yet this quiet, humble servant will establish a new kingdom, a reign of justice.

Psalm 29 anticipates the Gospel reading. Just as God spoke over the waters on the day of creation, and showed his power at the Red Sea, so at the baptism of Jesus the voice of God resounds over the waters of the Jordan.

The reading from the Acts of the Apostles shows us a surprised Peter. In the house of Cornelius—a centurion, a non-Jew—he encounters people who have heard God’s voice, and who long for the Gospel. Peter candidly acknowledges the goodness of God, who “shows no partiality” (10:34). And he begins to teach them about Jesus, whose ministry—like theirs—began with Baptism.

Matthew’s account of the baptism of Jesus differs from the other synoptic Gospel accounts in several ways. John stops Jesus as he comes to him at the Jordan—“I need to be baptized by you, and yet you are coming to me?” (3:14). Jesus responds with mysterious, omniscient words: “it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness” (3:15). Jesus’s awareness that he is walking in a path prepared by God, and outlined in the Scriptures and the prophets, is ever present in Matthew’s account of the Gospel. After Jesus’s baptism, something marvelous happens as the heavens are opened, and God’s voice is heard. The words of God that echo over the waters are addressed not to Jesus, as in Mark and Luke, but to all—“this is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (3:17). The words of the prophet are fulfilled: “Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased” (Isaiah 42:1).

Prayers

Today’s prayers are full of echoes of the Gospel accounts of the baptism of the Lord. The first of the two options for the Collect recalls how God’s voice proclaimed Jesus to be his “beloved Son.” We are also “children by adoption” by our Baptism; we pray that we may be, like Jesus, “well pleasing” to our God and Father. In the Prayer over the Offerings we ask that the bread and wine we bring may become the sacrifice of Christ, who came “to wash away the sins of the world.” The Preface of the Baptism of the Lord describes “signs and wonders” at the Jordan. The Father speaks, that “we might come to believe” in the Word made flesh. The Spirit appears as a dove, that we might recognize Christ as the Messiah, “anointed with the oil of gladness and sent to bring the good news to the poor.”

The Father’s words echoed over the waters of the Jordan: “Listen to him.” In the Prayer after Communion, we pray that we may faithfully listen to the Son of God and become God’s children “in name and in truth.”

Remembering Dr. King

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was born on January 15, 1929, and he is remembered each year on the third Monday in January. It is fitting that we remember him close to our observance of the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord: it would be hard to find a

clearer example of living the prophetic call that comes to us at our Baptism, and of drinking the cup that Jesus drank. There are many ways to remember Dr. King—in the homily, in the Prayer of the Faithful, and most especially in service projects or advocacy for justice. The website of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change (www.thekingcenter.org) has an array of resources for learning about this man, exploring his writings, and sharing his dream.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (January 18–25)

For more than a hundred years, Christians of many denominations have observed a week dedicated to prayer for the unity of all who believe in Christ. Each year, the World Council of Churches, in collaboration with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, selects a theme for the week and prepares materials for use in churches around the world. These resources, available for free download at www.oikoumene.org, provide a wealth of materials, including suggested readings, litanies, intercessions, and songs for use during Christian Unity week. The World Council of Churches also prepares a cycle of prayer for the entire year, with petitions and prayers for Christians in different parts of the world each week. This is a wonderful resource that is too little known.

SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (JANUARY 19)

Scriptures

The First Reading is drawn from the second of the four “Servant Songs” in Isaiah. From his mother’s womb, this man has been called to be the Lord’s servant. The reading gives us a glimpse of what the servant’s mission will be—not simply to “raise up” and “restore” God’s chosen people, Israel, but to be “a light to the nations” (49:6), so that God’s salvation can reach to the whole world.

Psalm 40 is the song of a faithful servant who speaks the justice of God without fear. In the refrain—“Here I am, Lord; I come to do your will”—we hear the willing, joyful response of Jesus; but as we join in the response, we make those words ours.

The Second Reading gives us the formal greeting with which 1 Corinthians opens. Paul follows the custom of the ancient world in stating who the letter is from, who it is for, and adding a greeting of good will. But unlike most letters of the time, Paul does not focus on the titles and dignity of those whom he addresses; instead, he casts everything in terms of relationship to God. The only title he claims for himself is “apostle of Christ by the will of God”; and he addresses the Corinthians as the “church of God,” “sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be holy” (1:2). Before entering into his subject, Paul acknowledges from where his authority comes, and is reverently aware of the presence of God in the community to whom he writes.

The Gospel is from John, and, like last Sunday’s Gospel, it focuses on the baptism of Jesus. John the Baptist sees Jesus and

speaks the marvelous words we echo at every Mass, words that reveal the whole mission of Jesus: “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (1:29). John says, “I did not know him” (1:31), and yet the names by which John speaks of Jesus show that he knows who Jesus is on the deepest level. He is the “Lamb of God”—the one who will be sacrificed to take away the people’s guilt. By the testimony of the Spirit, John recognizes Jesus as “the Son of God” (1:34). At his baptism, Jesus’s true identity is revealed for those with eyes to see.

Prayers

In the Collect, we ask the God who orders all things to hear our prayers for peace. The Prayer over the Offerings is a good meditation for all who are involved in the liturgy: we pray that we may be worthy to celebrate the Eucharist, for in it the work of our redemption is being accomplished. In the Prayer after Communion, we ask that we who have eaten the Bread of heaven may be united in mind and heart.

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (JANUARY 26)

Scriptures

The reading from Isaiah is the same reading we heard at the Christmas Mass during the Night. We hear it again today because it is quoted at some length in the Gospel reading. The yoke, the pole, and the rod are all implements associated with beasts of burden: the people Isaiah speaks about have been driven by oppression, like oxen before the plow. But the light of God brings freedom, justice, and joy into their darkness.

Psalm 27, with its imagery of light, is the perfect response to the Isaiah reading.

We continue our sequence of readings from 1 Corinthians. Saint Paul’s letter is full of challenges for this young Christian community. Already they are divided by “rivalries” (1:11), as some claim allegiance to one leader, while others adhere to someone else. But Paul powerfully makes the point that it is not the minister of Baptism who matters, only the Christ in whom all are baptized. Paul then speaks of his mission to preach the Gospel, “not with the wisdom of human eloquence” (1:17). He deliberately distances himself from the kind of empty argumentation that has divided the Corinthian community.

The Gospel gives us the beginning of Jesus’s ministry, his early preaching, and the calling of the first disciples. The first words of the reading are significant: “When Jesus heard that John had been arrested” (Matthew 4:12). The arrest of John does not frighten Jesus into silence; it stirs him to action. It seems almost to be what Jesus has been anticipating before beginning



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The reading from Isaiah on the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time is the same reading proclaimed at the Christmas Mass during the Night.

his mission. From the first, Matthew anticipates the suffering the Messiah will undergo—think of Matthew’s infancy narrative, with its emphasis on the confusion of Joseph, the cruelty of Herod, and the exile of the Holy Family. That pattern will continue as Matthew’s Gospel account unfolds throughout Year A.

Prayers

Every time we gather to celebrate the Sunday Eucharist, we become part of the great tradition which is our Catholic faith, handed down from generation to generation. We are doing something ancient. But we are also doing something new: “O sing a new song to the Lord,” states today’s Entrance Antiphon (cf. Psalm 96). Our liturgy is that new song of praise, ancient words given life by our voices and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

We pray that our actions may be guided in accordance with God’s will, for thus we will grow rich in good works (Collect). Everything we have is God’s gift, freely given. It is God who sanctifies the gifts we bring (Prayer over the Offerings). To our God who is full of surprises we pray that “we may always glory in your gift,” which is “new life” (Prayer after Communion). ♦

CORINNA LAUGHLIN is the pastoral assistant for liturgy at St. James Cathedral, Seattle, Washington.