

Fourth Sunday of Advent



Blessing the Tree

Oh God,
you created for us a beautiful world
of forest and stream, ocean and sky.
Today bless this tree,
which represents for us
the tree of life,
the evergreen symbol of paradise,
the saving mercy of your
Son's death on Calvary.
With the psalmist, we sing:
"Then shall all the trees of the forest
sing for joy
before the Lord; for he is coming,
for he is coming to judge the earth."
(Psalm 96:12b-13)
May the beauty of this tree
bless our celebrations and
teach us to be good stewards
of your Creation.
We ask this through the same Christ
our Lord. Amen.

Sunday, December 18, 2011 A Week for Joy

Today's Readings: 2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16; Psalm 89:2-3, 4-5, 27, 29 (2a); Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38. Notice the angel Gabriel's first word to Mary: "Rejoice" (in the revised *New American Bible*; in *The New Revised Standard Version Bible*, "Greetings"). Let's remember that word this week, which can be one of the most hectic weeks in the year. The angel says, "rejoice," not "spend, clean, cook, decorate, shop, bake, wrap, shop again, create the perfect holiday ambiance, work to exhaustion, and make everyone in the family sublimely happy."

We want to share in this rejoicing because Jesus has become one with humans; indeed, he has pitched his tent within us. None of us deserves this, so we celebrate God's

lavish abandon, the pure gratuity of God's gift. Yet even in the scripture, there is some ambiguity in the joy of this holy time. At the angel's greeting, Mary is "much perplexed." Indeed, the whole experience is for her a two-edged sword: joy tempered by natural, human fear.

This week, we'll hear two songs of praise: Mary's (on Thursday) and Zechariah's (on Saturday). Mary's song overcomes the doubt and fear she must have felt. Zechariah's breaks a long silence, welcomes new possibility, and expresses a hard-won trust in God—and his wife. Try to make this week your own canticle of gratitude and praise. Plan to read aloud the nativity story on Christmas Eve.



This Week at Home

Monday, December 19

Time with Scripture

The Gospel readings this week are a sequential, magnificent unfolding of Luke's first chapter. Rather than become frazzled by "To Do" lists, deliberately set aside time to read each day's Gospel passage. Choose one phrase to memorize, and repeat it to yourself when things get hectic. These core stories are peopled by ordinary folks like us. Today's Readings: Judges 13:2-7, 24-25a; Psalm 71:3-4a, 5-6ab, 16-17 (see 8); Luke 1:5-25.

Tuesday, December 20

"O Come, O Key of David, Come"

The O Antiphon today prays for the Key of David to come, freeing prisoners and unlocking mysteries. Mary at the Annunciation is a model for living gracefully with the tensions of mystery. The angel's announcement disrupts her ordinary world and changes her life completely, yet she remains God's trusting handmaiden. What questions are still unresolved in our hearts or minds? Ask Mary to help us live with those tensions. Today's Readings: Isaiah 7:10-14; Psalm 24:1-2, 3-4ab, 5-6 (see 7c, 10b); Luke 1:26-38.

Wednesday, December 21

Elizabeth's Hospitality

Elizabeth's welcome to Mary in today's Gospel expresses the hospitality we'd all like to practice during this season. The older woman doesn't waste time regretting the unusual circumstances of the young girl's pregnancy. Instead she blesses her "with a loud cry." Elizabeth is our model for welcoming life. Today's Readings: Song of Songs 2:8-14; Psalm 33:2-3, 11-12, 20-21 (1a, 3a); Luke 1:39-45.

Thursday, December 22

Express Mary's Joy—Artistically

Today's Gospel reading contains Mary's song of praise to God. If you and your family have never responded to a scripture

passage artistically, try it. You could provide clay and ask each person to sculpt this Gospel's essence, or make figures for your nativity scene. Offer materials for drawing or painting. If you like movement, play a musical Magnificat and express your joy through dance. Ask yourself, If God's mercy extends "from generation to generation," how is it reaching us now? Today's Readings: 1 Samuel 1:24-28; Responsorial Psalm: Samuel 2:1, 4-5, 6-7, 8abcd; Luke 1:46-56.

Friday, December 23

God-with-Us

As excitement in the household builds, think of today's O Antiphon: "O Emmanuel . . . come and set us free." *Emmanuel* means "God-with-us"—right here, right now, even if we don't have perfect presents or elaborate treats. We pray for freedom from high expectations and unrealistic demands. Today's Gospel reading recounts the birth of John the Baptist, Jesus' forerunner. Neighbors and relatives rejoice; Zechariah regains his speech. Yet when Christ is born, there are no relatives around, and the stable is probably not cozy. Still, in both settings, God is present. No matter how imperfect our situations may seem, God is with us there. Today's Readings: Malachi 3:1-4, 23-24; Psalm 25:4-5ab, 8-9, 10 and 14; Luke 1:57-66.

Saturday, December 24

Vigil of the Nativity of the Lord

Each family develops its own traditions for this day, depending on its culture. In the Polish tradition, an unleavened round wafer, called an *opatek*, is blessed at church and brought home. After it is shared with good wishes all around, and after the appearance of the first star of the evening, the family enjoys a many-course meatless meal on a table strewn with straw and covered by a white tablecloth. What are your traditions? Your parents'? Today's Readings: 2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16; Psalm 89:2-3, 4-5, 27 and 29 (2); Luke 1:67-79.

