

**Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People**  
Fourth Sunday of Advent – Year C

**RCL & ACNA Readings** – Micah 5:2-5; Psalm 80:1-7; Hebrews 10:1-10; Luke 1:39-56

**Introduction.** The traditional focus of the fourth Sunday of Advent is Mary. Protestant Christianity, as a generalization, does not really know what to do with Mary. It can be argued that Catholicism does too much with her and, in a reactionary fashion, Protestants then do too little. Everyone has Luke 1:48 in their Bible in which Mary says, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that all generations will call her blessed. The question then remains: do we? Do we call her blessed, and how do we acknowledge the mother of the Messiah?

**Common Theme.** The theme of the incarnation and the presence of God among his people permeates our readings this week as we contemplate Mary. In the Catholic tradition, Mary is known as the mother of God, and in the Orthodox tradition, she is known as the God-bearer. Those are two very different positions to view Mary. Anglican theology aligns closer to the Orthodox position. Only two objects bore the presence of God, both Mary and the Ark of the Covenant. In just that alone, she is holy and blessed.

**Micah 5:2-5.** This famous prophecy declares that the Lord will raise up a powerful ruler from a very humble place, the small town of Bethlehem. Bethlehem was a well-known town in the Jewish world, being the birthplace of King David. Despite that fame, the town never grew into a large influential city. The Hebrew text is intriguing in that it does not say the Messiah will come from Bethlehem but that a ruler will come. The word is '*moshel*', which is usually translated as 'governor'. How then does this passage become read as a messianic prophecy? Interestingly, this ruler does not begin in Bethlehem, as the text says he is from '*mikedem*'. *Mikedem* has the meaning of 'antiquity' or 'from ancient times' and, in Jewish exegesis, goes even further back than that. There is a Hebraic understanding that several things were in existence before the creation. This is derived from the word *mikedem*. The saying is: Seven things were created before the world was created: Torah, repentance, the Garden of Eden (Paradise), Gehinnom, the Throne of Glory, the Temple, and the name of the Messiah (Pesachim 54a). From where do the rabbis conclude that the Messiah was pre-existent? From the word *mikedem* in verse Micah 5:2. We can also see here the Jewish understanding that the title *moshel* indeed refers to the Messiah and is not a Christian interpolation.

**Psalm 80:1-7.** Kings, rulers, and gods were often described as shepherds throughout the ancient world. In pre-urban antiquity, the nomadic shepherds were a source of wealth, power, and spiritual leadership for the communities of which they were in charge. Indeed the initial leaders of the people of Israel, from Abraham to David, were also actual shepherds. In this prayer for restoration, the psalmist describes God as both the shepherd of Israel and Lord of heavenly armies. As commander of angelic hosts, God is able to bring military salvation. As a shepherd, God is able to care personally over the flock, the house of Israel. Shepherds tend flocks with the provision of protection, health, food, guidance, and nurture. Verses 3 and 7 seek the Lord to 'shine his countenance'. This has echoes of the Aaronic Benediction (Num 6:24-26) in which Israel is blessed by the priests proclaiming the Lord's face shining on them.

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This has the idea of God's presence and favour. In the context of Advent, we celebrate the light of God and his presence coming into the world.

**Hebrews 10:1-10.** The Psalms are a major inspiration for the writer of Hebrews. Here the author is quoting Psalm 40:6-8 from the Septuagint, as is common in the New Testament. Hebrews 10:5 uses the psalm to describe God preparing a body for Jesus for his advent into the physical world. The original Hebrew text reads quite differently. Literally, the Masoretic Hebrew text of Psalm 40:6 reads, 'ears you have dug for me'. In cases like this, where a text appears to be misquoted or taken out of context, the Aramaic and Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible show their important value. The Septuagint was written several generations prior to Jesus and thus cannot be said to have a 'Christian bias'. We see that the Septuagint translators understood the Hebrew metaphor in the psalm to mean the creation of a physical body and not only a person's ears. God has always wanted to dwell with his people. One of his first instructions to Israel after the exodus from Egypt was to construct a tabernacle because the Lord desired to dwell with them in their midst. The mystery of the incarnation is beyond human understanding. It pleased the Lord to come to his people through his incarnated Son prepared in the womb of Mary. It was the delight of the Son to do the will of the Father.

**Luke 1:39-56.** Mary is a very interesting character. She is one of only a few women in the Bible to which God speaks directly. Another is Eve.<sup>1</sup> Angelic and divine visitations tend to be directed to the male characters in the Bible. The Gospels make no mention of the parents of Mary, and she has no interaction with family outside of her cousin Elizabeth.

Orthodox Christianity holds to a tradition that Mary's parents are Joachim and Anna.<sup>2</sup> They had a home near the temple in Jerusalem which is now the site of the Church of St. Anne's Bethesda. Joachim and Anna, the parents of the *Theotokos* (God-bearer) died when Mary was ten-years-old. Mary was then cared for in the temple.<sup>3</sup> According to tradition, Mary was raised in the temple confines with priests and prophets, including Anna the prophetess. She had experienced and seen many mystical things in the temple and thus is not disturbed by the visitation by the angel Gabriel. Rather she is 'perplexed by his words' (Luke 1:29).

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<sup>1</sup> The Lord also spoke to Hagar from heaven (Gen 21:17) and to Miriam together with her brothers, Aaron and Moses (Num 12). God says one sentence to Sarah through a curtain and not directly (Gen 18:10).

<sup>2</sup> This tradition is recorded in the Protoevangelion of James, a text that is apocryphal but has had much influence in the Orthodox tradition. 'One might say that the Protoevangelium of James enjoyed a hybrid status which one could describe as being both apocryphal and quasi-canonical at the same time'. Cornelia Horn, 'The Protoevangelium of James and Its Reception in the Caucasus: Status Quaestionis,' *Scrinium* 14.1 (2018): 223–38. [https://brill.com/view/journals/scri/14/1/article-p223\\_15.xml](https://brill.com/view/journals/scri/14/1/article-p223_15.xml).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. James 1:27

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Mary had heard from the angel Gabriel that her cousin Elizabeth was pregnant (Luke 1:36). As the ladies meet, so too do the unborn children. The Holy Spirit touches John in the womb who 'leaps with excitement' in the presence of the Messiah. Mary responds to Elizabeth's blessing with what we now call the Magnificat, the Song of Mary. Her song resembles the song of Hannah, who had stood before the tabernacle in Shiloh praying for a child (1 Sam 2:1-10). Songs are not uncommon in the biblical text. The first time that Miriam, the sister of Moses, speaks in the Bible is when she breaks into song at the Red Sea. Both the song of Hannah and the song of Mary reflect on God's salvation, that he exalts the lowly and the poor and that those who were once hungry and empty are now full and satisfied.

All of these are fantastic themes we should be contemplating over Christmas. Instead of focusing on presents, we should cast our minds to the real Presence! Mary could have said no to the angel and to God's request for her to be the God-bearer. Mary knew the life-long ridicule she would have to endure. No one except Joseph would ever believe that she had become pregnant via the Holy Spirit or that the man who visited her was really an angel. Mary exhibits her humility and willingness to suffer much more for the Lord than is explicit in the text. Unlike Eve, who heard the voice of God in the Garden and disobeyed, Mary will hear the voice of Heaven and choose to obey. Because of her obedience, we are all blessed, and it is only fitting and right that in response all generations should call her blessed.

**About the author.** The Rev. Aaron Eime is a deacon at Christ Church Jerusalem and a teacher for CMJ Israel. Aaron studied in the master's program at Hebrew University with a focus on early Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible. He also studied psychology and sociology at Queensland University in Australia. Aaron is a dedicated Bible teacher exploring the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. He reads Aramaic and ancient Greek and is fluent in German and Hebrew. He has taught internationally, including in Europe, North America, Hong Kong, and China. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.