

## Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Fourth Sunday in Advent – Year B

**RCL Readings** – II Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26 (or Canticle 15); Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

**ACNA Readings** – II Samuel 7:1-17; Psalm 132:(1-7) 8-19; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

**Seasonal Introduction.** The season of Advent has a rhythm to it. In the anticipation and build up to Christmas the first Sunday looks at the future judgment and the coming of the Messiah. In the second and third weeks we hear from John the Baptist and the voice of the prophets. The fourth and final Sunday is dedicated to talking about Mary the mother of Jesus. Protestants are usually unsure of what to do with Mary. On one hand there is the rejection of idolizing her and talking about her too much, which is one of the criticisms Protestants have of the Catholic church, while on the other hand Protestants don't talk about her at all. However, ignoring her really is not the answer for Protestant Christianity as every single believer is still going to have Luke 1:48 in their Bibles which reads; all generations will call me blessed. The challenge then is how do you do that? You honestly cannot 'call her blessed' by ignoring her! One question this Advent week is to ponder: How do you call Mary blessed in every generation?

**Common Theme.** Our readings this week revolve around the sacred history of Israel. God had, in time and space, created a covenant with David to establish an enduring throne—God promised that, through David's descendants, a ruling Messiah<sup>1</sup> would be king forever. This mystery of redemption, played out over a thousand years, is pondered in the Psalms and proclaimed by Paul.<sup>2</sup> But it was through the courage of a young Jewish woman, obedient to God but also humble that this came to pass when Mary declared herself a servant of the Lord and conceived a son, Jesus, son of David.

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<sup>1</sup> The word '*messiah*' or 'anointed one' is actually rarely used in the Hebrew Scriptures in connection to an eschatological redeemer. Israelite kings and priests were all anointed but more often than not proved disappointing. The concept of messiah as the future kingly redeemer figure developed following the return from Babylonian exile. Various Jewish groups within Jewish society held widely varying opinions on the nature of redemption being political or spiritual or even a combination of the two. The commonality of the different views was that the messianic redemption was always in the future and linked to the lineage of king David.

<sup>2</sup> Whether it's secular or Biblical deeds, History demonstrates the need for endurance, perseverance, effort and patience combined to complete major feats. William Wilberforce battled against slavery in the British Empire for twenty years while Moses wasn't even able to enter the promised land, despite 40 years of serving God. No less so in the long redemptive history from David to Jesus which took one thousand years to come to fruition. In contrast to sacred history, many in our modern evangelical world have immediate expectations towards prayers and prophecies. God is expected to answer, confirm and provide miracles immediately upon a prayer request. Sacred history should instruct us that the Lord's sense of time and our sense of time are not one and the same thing.

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**Hebraic Context.** Miraculous birth narratives of Biblical heroes are uncommon but not unknown in the Hebrew Scriptures. Adam,<sup>3</sup> Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Samson and Samuel all have special circumstances and miracles surrounding their birth.<sup>4</sup> Usually, prior to the birth, an angel or divine being appears to an individual; the latter is afraid; the message of an upcoming birth is given; objections are raised; a sign is given; and the birth is considered unusual because the mother was either of advanced age or infertile. In Moses' case, he was miraculously saved at birth.<sup>5</sup> Hence, John the Baptist's conception and Jesus of Nazareth's immaculate conception are linked to a series of repeating stories of unusual births from faithful parents during the history of the Jewish people.

**II Samuel 7:1-11, 16.** The account of the prophet Nathan visiting king David to deliver the prophetic promise in which the Lord will 'establish a house for you ... (which will) endure forever' inaugurates the messianic line into David's family. Although this prophetic proclamation is not explicitly called a covenant in this chapter, it is explicitly named as a covenant in the last words of David (2 Samuel 23:5).<sup>6</sup> The Lord's promise to David is in response to his desire to construct a Temple for God. After David's many wars and victories he now resided in relative security and opulence, demonstrated by the expensive cedar material of his palace. It is also of note, that Nathan gave immediate encouragement that he should proceed with construction, only to be called up short by a word of correction from the Lord in the night watch.<sup>7</sup> Prophets, it seems (like the rest of us) are not infallible. However, interesting these secondary issues may be, it is verse 16 that is preeminent in this text. The occupants of the throne of Israel will always be David's descendants. The 'house' of David is not brick and mortar but a lasting genealogy.<sup>8</sup> Sacred

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<sup>3</sup> Adam had, perhaps, the most unique and miraculous birth, God formed Him and breathed him into life. being created as an adult.

<sup>4</sup> Born of barren parents: Isaac, Genesis 21:1-7; Jacob, Genesis 25:21; Samson, Genesis 13:2-3; Samuel, I Samuel 1:1-2, 9-20; John, Luke 1:5-25

<sup>5</sup> While Moses' birth wasn't miraculous, his birth narrative still is considered miraculous as he is saved from death three separate times: from death by the Pharaoh, from death by the Nile, and from death by Pharaoh's daughter.

<sup>6</sup> "Now these are the last words of David: '... For he has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure...'." David understood that the prophetic voice from Nathan, though not specifically spoken, had an everlasting component to the covenant with God.

<sup>7</sup> Nathan told David that God did not want him to build the Temple, but that did not result in David's laziness or inaction concerning the future construction. 1 Chronicles 22 and 29 provides details in which David not only gathered all the material for Solomon to use, he also hired the craftsmen to start the work. David was still very much involved in the preparation for the building, despite not being attributed to its construction.

<sup>8</sup> Until David no descendent of the former judges and rulers of Israel had been successfully succeeded by his son. While the judge Gideon does have a son to follow him the narrative is a sad tale of fratricide and immediate descent into idolatry. The sons of Eli, God's prophet and priest, also failed to successfully succeed their father and the mantle of prophet fell to Samuel—whose sons also failed to succeed him. The family of the first king, Saul, were wiped out following the civil war with David. The enduring Davidic dynasty was going to be a very new institution in Israelite history.

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history tells us that the line of David physically ruled Judah in total for only four centuries. The latter voice of the prophets proclaim that only by a Messiah that comes through David's lineage, can this prophecy be ultimately fulfilled.

**Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26.** Ethan only has one Psalm recorded, even though he was famous for his wisdom.<sup>9</sup> But this Psalm is a declaration of praise to God for His loving kindness and faithfulness. Ethan was one of the singers, appointed by David, to sing at the Temple Solomon would build. And so he notes that, as the loving kindness and faithfulness of God lasts forever, so too should the praise of God's mercy! Being a contemporary of David and Solomon,<sup>10</sup> Ethan connects God's loving kindness and faithfulness to the eternal covenant He made with David in II Samuel 7.

The psalmist describes how God spoke through a vision concerning David to someone called the 'holy one' קֹדֶשׁ יְיָ.<sup>11</sup> David is both a king of the people and a servant of the Lord. The future pattern of a servant-king who is anointed by God, is established in this vision. To anoint מָשַׁח *mashach* is also literally 'to make a messiah' and connects into the messianic role of the Davidic family. Verse 26 notes that the family of David will also have an intimate relationship with the Lord. They will call God as 'Father' as well as saviour. This was true of David as well as all his descendants and even more so by Jesus the Messiah, the son of David.

**Canticle 15.** Luke places the Magnificat within the account of Mary's visit to Elizabeth. Unprovable from external accounts, it seems a safe assumption that the Magnificat was given to Luke in an interview with Mary. Luke seems to have access to Mary that the other Gospel

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<sup>9</sup> I Kings 4:31, "For [Solomon] was wiser than all other men, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite and Heman..."

<sup>10</sup> Another tradition says that Ethan the Ezrahite would be a disciple of Ezra or from Ethan's order/school of singers. However, the term Ezrahite (הַאֲזַרְחִי) is a completely different word than Ezra (עֶזְרָא). It is also only mentioned in relation to the singers (I Kings 4:31; Psalm 88:1, 89:1) standing before the Tabernacle (I Chronicles 6:31-33, 44; 15:19). Perhaps this is his title because Ethan and Heman were designated to sing at dawn (זֶרַח) or for some other, unknown reason.

<sup>11</sup> The Hebrew word חַסִּיד *hassid* first appears etymologically in Deuteronomy 33:8 where Moses is blessing the tribe of Levi. The blessing given by Moses involves the mysterious communication device called the Thummim and Urim belonging to an individual called 'the holy one'. חַסִּיד *hassid* is sometimes translated as pious one, saint or faithful servant, but in each case the 'hassid' is an individual.

Commentators often portray the receiver of the vision to be David himself, perhaps through the word of Nathan. On this reading that the 'holy one' is indeed David, the connection is easily made between the lectionary pairing of Psalm 89 and 2 Samuel 7.

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writers do not.<sup>12</sup> <sup>13</sup> Did she compose it as a guest in Elizabeth and Zechariah's home, or was it poetry that captured the thoughts of her soul whilst she was there? We know nothing of Mary's upbringing or spiritual training.<sup>14</sup> However, she appears to be familiar with the sacred history of Israel and the prophetic promises to Israel through the coming redeemer. From the literal reading of the text we can ascertain that somehow Mary knows that through her obedience the promises to Israel will be fulfilled (verse 55). This may explain the line in verse 48 that, "all generations will call me blessed"—A prophetic statement that has surely come true. Her words are worship born out of faith that has come through extreme obedience.

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. In many ways, her song resembles that of the song of Hannah,<sup>15</sup> 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, is attributed to speaking in the Bible is when she breaks into song at the Red Sea.<sup>16</sup> The songs of Hannah, Miriam, and 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

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<sup>12</sup> There is very little infancy or childhood stories of Jesus to be found in the Gospels. Much of what we do have is recorded in Luke's opening chapters; where he relates the angelic announcements to Zachariah, Mary, and the shepherds of Bethlehem. Luke also uniquely describes the 'swaddling clothes' and the circumcision of Jesus in the Temple. The account of Jesus as a child remaining in the Temple while His parents returned to the Galilee is likewise a unique story in Luke. All of this indicates Luke's personal access to an eyewitness of these events.

<sup>13</sup> Many commentators assume that Luke is a Gentile, based on an interpretation from Colossians 4:14. Syrian Orthodox Christianity holds to the tradition that Luke was a Jewish man from Antioch, which is in Syria, who went to Jerusalem to study, just like Paul did from Tarsus. There he encountered Jesus and became his disciple. Orthodox tradition says that Luke is one of the 72 unnamed disciples sent out by Jesus. Thus Luke is actually an eyewitness to Jesus and some of His ministry. This explains where he gets his unique material (particularly after Luke 10). And as a Hellenised Jew like Paul, he feels a close kinship and it's easy for him to team up with Paul on his adventures in the Book of Acts.

<sup>14</sup> Orthodox Christianity has preserved the childhood stories of Mary in a 2nd century manuscript called the Protoevangelium of James. The document was attested to by Origen in the 3rd century and is the source of much of the Marian doctrines found in both the Orthodox and Catholic Churches, see Footnote 22 for more information.

<sup>15</sup> The Song of Hannah or Hannah's prayer reads more like a Psalm and is often compared to Psalm 113 which contains many of the same themes, including motherhood for barren women. Many commentators consider it to have been composed after Samuel was born, handed down in oral tradition and inserted by a redactor of the book of Samuel here into the text. The reference to a king in I Samuel 2:10 is problematic as there was no king at the time and supports the later tradition.

<sup>16</sup> Moses' sister, possibly Miriam, is recorded speaking in Exodus 2:7 but Exodus, the Book of Names (שמות), is careful to introduce names only when they will be most impactful. (The parents of Moses are unnamed during his childhood until his genealogy is required. And the Kings of Egypt are unnamed throughout the entirety of the Torah.)

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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 her that she had become pregnant via the Holy Spirit, or that the man who visited her was really an angel.<sup>17</sup> Mary exhibits her humility and willingness to suffer much more for the Lord than is immediate 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.

**Romans 16:25-27.** In this famous doxology, Paul references<sup>18</sup> "...the mystery that was kept secret for long ages." The mystery is, of course, the identity of the promised Davidic heir, now expected as the Messiah, and the extraordinarily unexpected way in which Jesus of Nazareth was and is its fulfillment.<sup>19</sup> Why God would keep such a thing secret is an obvious question that humans will continuously find has no answer that will fully satisfy. But the Hebrew Scriptures contain a great deal of mystery. Proverbs 25:2 says that it is the glory of God to conceal a matter and to search out a matter is the honour of a king. The plan of salvation, announced through the psalms and prophets in ways that appear ambiguous and obscure, has its final outworking in the person and life of Jesus.

**Luke 1:26-38.** The angel Gabriel appears twice in Luke's gospel, once with Zechariah while he was ministering incense in the Temple and the second time to Mary. The only other time Gabriel appears in the Hebrew Scriptures is in Daniel 8-9.<sup>20</sup> The book of Daniel is loaded with messianic themes and so the deliberate sending of Gabriel as messenger has a certain eschatological nuance to it.

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<sup>17</sup> Matthew's gospel provides the details in which Joseph initially had been inclined to divorce Mary in a quiet fashion but changed his mind following a visitation in a dream by an angel of the Lord who informed him that the child in Mary was indeed conceived by the Holy Spirit, Matthew 1:18-20.

<sup>18</sup> In different manuscripts of Romans that have been found in archeology, this doxology actually appears in different places which has caused some scholars to conclude it was, in reality, added later by an unknown redactor. Regardless of authorship, the doxology summarizes, quite succinctly, the mystery of the Messiah and His work of reconciling the Gentile nations to obedience to God.

<sup>19</sup> The concept of 'mystery' has a long Biblical tradition. There are many 'mysteries' throughout the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, another being Gentile inclusion into the Commonwealth of Israel through faith in Jesus the Messiah, Colossians 1:27. In the Septuagint the word mystery μυστήριον occurs 21 times, the word μυστήριον also occurs in many of the books of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha and the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Hebraic perspective is that not everything is known or understood at first, knowledge is gained over time through study, divine revelation, or experience of history.

<sup>20</sup> Gabriel appears alongside other angels such as Michael, Raphael and Uriel in the Book of Enoch (1 Enoch 9-10). Gabriel is not referred to as an archangel in the Hebrew Scriptures, which does not seem to have ranks of angels but rather different classifications of angels such as Cherubim and Seraphim. The term archangel occurs during the 2nd Temple period and makes its way into rabbinic and kabbalistic literature.

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Mary herself is a very interesting character. She is one of only two women in the Bible to which God speaks directly or through an angel; the other is Eve.<sup>21</sup> Voices from heaven, angelic and divine visitations tend to be directed to the male characters in the Bible.<sup>22</sup> The Gospels make no mention of the parents of Mary and she has no interaction with family outside of her cousin Elizabeth.<sup>23</sup> Gabriel greets her as 'highly favoured one'. Tradition says that Mary was orphaned as a young girl, so it's easy to see why she may have been perplexed by such a greeting. In what way would Mary have considered herself highly favoured?

Mary is considered to be the first disciple of Jesus as she is the first person who says yes to God in relation to Jesus. The gospel notes she is in Nazareth, a town that is unmentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures and any other 2nd Temple period literature, indicating its unremarkable historical nature. The text indicates she is betrothed to a man called Joseph and according to the variant genealogies of Matthew and Luke, both Joseph and Mary are descendants of David with Mary's lineage including a connection to Levi. Thus Jesus is a combination of Judah-Levi with the background themes of King-Priest.

The actual annunciation by Gabriel (verse 32-33) closely follows the divine proclamation in 2 Samuel 7:9-16 to David. The focus of the annunciation is not on Mary herself but on the soon expected child. His name is provided by heaven,<sup>24</sup> as is His title as Son of the Most High, and the continuation of the Davidic line on the everlasting throne is assured. Both Mary and Zachariah ask Gabriel the same question at hearing his announcement; how will this be? The answer is through the power of the Holy Spirit. Zachariah's son John the Baptist, was going to be full of the Holy Spirit from conception and Mary, through the Spirit, was to issue the 'holy one'.

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<sup>21</sup> In Genesis, God says one sentence to Sarah through a curtain and not directly face to face, Genesis 18:15

<sup>22</sup> This is not to say that because the Biblical text provides scant material in which we see God actually conversing directly to women, doesn't mean God doesn't speak to women at all. There are many examples of female judges and prophets, including Anna the prophetess in the Temple which would imply divine communication of some fashion.

<sup>23</sup> Orthodox Christianity holds to a tradition that Mary's parents are Joachim and Anna. (This tradition is recorded in the Protoevangelium of James, a text that appears as deuterocanonical in Orthodoxy). According to the Protoevangelium, sometimes called the Gospel of James, the parents of Mary were Levites and had a home near the Temple in Jerusalem, which is now the site of the Church of St Anne's in Bethesda. Joachim and Anna, the parents of the future *theotokos* (God-bearer) died when Mary was ten years old. Mary was then cared for in the Temple, partly because she was an orphaned child of a levite, but also because true religion was the taking care of widows and orphans. According to this tradition, Mary was then 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).

<sup>24</sup> Before Birth: Isaac, Genesis 17:19; Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, Isaiah 8:1-4; John, Luke 1:13; Jesus, Matthew 1:21, Luke 1:31 (Luke 2:21). During life: Abram to Abraham, Genesis 17:5; Sarai to Sarah, Genesis 17:15; Jacob to Israel, Genesis 32:28; Simon to Peter, Matthew 16:17-18. Saul was not renamed by God but was called by His given name, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Rather, Paul was one of his cultural names, Acts 13:9.

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**Hebraic Perspective.** In Jewish exegetical tradition, beginnings and endings of themes, narratives and issues often occur on the same day, with the same type of people and in the same fashion. For example; Israel as a nation was called to be a light to the Gentiles and the first king of Israel, who would have been tasked to lead Israel as witness to the nations, was Saul from the tribe of Benjamin. Later the first Apostle to the Gentiles with the good news of Jesus the Messiah was Paul, also known as Saul from the tribe of Benjamin.<sup>25</sup> Applying this Hebraic perspective to the Gospels and to Mary, we first begin with Eve, the other woman God spoke with in the Scriptures. Eve spoke to God in the Garden while she was still a virgin as it was only after the exile from the Garden that Adam 'knew' Eve.<sup>26</sup> Eve was disobedient to God's voice. Her disobedience facilitated in the Fall and the introduction of death into the world. Thus if a young virgin was involved in the 'problem' a young virgin will participate in the 'solution'. In contrast to Eve, Mary is obedient to God's voice. Her obedience will facilitate death being removed from the world. The Gospels open in a very Jewish style and context with the virgin Mary.

### ACNA Readings

**Psalm 132:(1-7) 8-19.** Psalm 132 is among the collection known as the Psalms of Ascent, traditionally said to be sung by pilgrims on the thrice yearly pilgrimage to Jerusalem. No author is attributed to its creation, although it has been argued by some that since verses 8-10 are quoted in Solomon's prayer of dedication of the temple in 2 Chronicles 6:41-42 that this is actually another psalm of Solomon. The psalm begins with David's passion to 'find a place for the Lord', reflecting his desire in 2 Samuel 7 to construct a house for God. Sacred history as written in Samuel does not record David making a vow, and yet the author of this psalm describes how David 'swore to the Lord and vowed to the Mighty One of Jacob' that what he had purposed, he would fulfil. This illustrates how tradition and exegetical commentary can enter later Biblical texts and even into the prayer life of the Jewish people. The designation of 'your anointed one (messiah)' in verse 10 applies to David as well as all his descendants who were the anointed kings of Israel and Judah. As David had made a vow in verse 2 so the Lord also makes a vow in verse 11 which is the oath He had made to David in 2 Samuel 7. The Lord's oath was conditional on the obedience of the descendants of David. Should they follow the covenant with God, then there would always be a Davidic ruler on the throne. In contrast to the conditional covenant with David, the psalm concludes with the unconditional choosing of

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<sup>25</sup> Another example of the important connection between beginnings and endings is Canaan. Following the Flood, Canaan the son of Ham is cursed in Genesis 9:24 for an incident with his grandfather Noah. The antediluvian world had been destroyed due to wickedness and yet wickedness had returned again almost immediately into the postdiluvian world, and Canaan was involved. Thus the nation that would bring 'light to the nations' of this new world would flourish in the land of Canaan.

<sup>26</sup> The Temptation and Fall of Man is in Genesis 3. Then following the expulsion from the Garden, Genesis 4 begins with 'Now Adam knew Eve his wife' which is the first reference to intimacy in the Bible between couples. The conclusion by Jewish exegesis is that Eve was a virgin while in the Garden of Eden.

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Zion by God. The Lord has chosen Zion to be His resting place forever.<sup>27</sup> No conditions are attached to the 'choosing', but because of the choice of God the future of Jerusalem is secure. Material blessings are promised as the poor will be satisfied with bread and the clergy will do their duties with righteousness. Here we see another Hebraic tradition in which the physical and spiritual blessings often go together in both the prophets and the psalms.

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<sup>27</sup> Worship of God was not left to the whim of the average Israelite. There was to be a specific place that God would expect His people to meet Him and worship at. However the location chosen by the Lord for His Temple is obscure in the Torah and the period of the Judges. Moses commanded the people to; 'seek the place where the Lord your God chooses, out of all your tribes, to put His Name for His dwelling place, there you shall go' (Deut 12:5). The Tabernacle stood at Shiloh for 369 years, but this location only appears in one psalm (Psalm 78:60). The Psalms, as a collection, consistently affirm the important spiritual location of Zion and Jerusalem.