

## Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent

December 16, 2018

Solemn Evensong

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Year 1: Amos 9:11–15; John 3:22–30; Micah 5:2, 4*

In 1998, the summer before I came to Saint Mary's, the late Father Raymond Brown published what would be the last of a series of essay collections on the Sunday gospel lessons.<sup>1</sup> I had the privilege once of hearing him speak at Notre Dame; I waited around afterwards to meet him and ask him a question. I bring this up because a question I didn't ask him would come up as I began to use that last collection of essays.

I was puzzled by a footnote on the subject of Advent Sunday gospel lessons. Brown wrote, "That the Last Sunday after Pentecost (Christ the King) and the First Sunday of Advent both have lectionary readings about the return of Christ, the Son of Man, at the end of time and yet . . . we expect a type of second coming at Christmas . . . I think . . . we should prepare for Christmas by a different type of Sunday readings."<sup>2</sup> Okay. But he didn't say what those would be.

Father Jay Smith, Brown's student, knew the answer. Brown thought we ought to prepare for Christmas by reading what Matthew and Luke wrote to introduce the birth of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *Christ in the Gospels of the Ordinary Sundays: Essays on the Gospel Readings of the Ordinary Sundays in the Three-Year Liturgical Cycle* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 36 n.

It speaks volumes about my formation at Nashotah House in my day that I learned much more about how to be, to use a phrase in the Prayer Book, “a leader of worship in a Christian assembly,”<sup>3</sup> than I did about the Bible.

I remember being knocked over, as it were, by Father Brown’s remarks about the importance of the beginning of Matthew, “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers”<sup>4</sup>—and we’re off to the races, as it were, with lots of names. For Matthew, Jesus was “the embodiment of Israel’s history.”<sup>5</sup> What was absolutely new for me in Brown was Matthew’s unique focus on five women.

Brown wrote, “We hear nothing of the saintly patriarchal wives”<sup>6</sup>—though I’m not at all comfortable referring to Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel as “saintly”—a subject for another day.

Brown draws our attention to the life situations of the women who are named. There’s the Canaanite Tamar, who tricked her father-in-law Jacob into sleeping with her so that she might bear a child.<sup>7</sup> (Though omitted by the Daily Office Lectionary, here the lessons are rearranged so that we hear as it is told in Genesis, between Joseph being sold into slavery and Joseph’s eventual great success

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<sup>3</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 1:1–2.

<sup>5</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *A Coming Christ in Advent: Essays on the Gospel Narratives for the Birth of Jesus (Matthew 1 and Luke 1)* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1988), 12–14.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 38:1–30.

in Egypt.) Then there's the Canaanite Rahab, a prostitute.<sup>8</sup> The Moabite Ruth who followed her mother-in-law Naomi to Bethlehem where Naomi would send her to sleep with Boaz before she was betrothed to him.<sup>9</sup> She would become his wife<sup>10</sup> and would be one of David's great grandmothers.<sup>11</sup> King David had Uriah the Hittite's wife—not named by Joseph, but we know her name was Bathsheba—pregnant with David's child, so David had Uriah murdered in a battle so that David could take her as his wife.<sup>12</sup> The fifth woman is Mary, who is pregnant though she has not had marital relations with the man to whom she has been betrothed.<sup>13</sup>

Luke's places Jesus' genealogy after Jesus is baptized and before Jesus begins his ministry. Neither Matthew's nor Luke's genealogies are ever read at a Sunday or feast day Eucharist. Yet they both speak to the unfolding of salvation history for Christians—Luke, I remind you, declares not only Jesus but also Adam to be the son of God.<sup>14</sup>

December 25 has a long name in the Prayer Book Calendar: “The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ: Christmas Day.” In Luke, the preaching of John the son of Zechariah was to prepare people to receive Jesus' proclamation of the dominion of God. Brown's insights—dreams—about Advent gospels resonate with me. I like

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<sup>8</sup> Joshua 2:1–24; 6:22–25.

<sup>9</sup> Ruth 3:1–5.

<sup>10</sup> Ruth 3:6–4:12.

<sup>11</sup> Ruth 4:18–22.

<sup>12</sup> 2 Samuel 11:1–27.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 1:18–19.

<sup>14</sup> Luke 3:23–38.

the quiet of Advent to get ready to celebrate birth not death, life not judgment,

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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