

## The Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 19, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Year C: Micah 5:2–4; Psalm 80:1–7; Hebrews 10:5–10; Luke 1:39–56*

There are four short Old Testament texts that are shared with three- to six-year-old children in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd—a Montessori based Christian formation program for children. These are the only Old Testament texts shared with young children. The primary aim in giving these texts to the children is to prepare for the celebration of Christmas. The indirect aim is to assist them with what Montessori calls “education to wonder.”<sup>1</sup>

The first of the four is from Isaiah: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined.”<sup>2</sup> The second is from Numbers: “A star shall come forth out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.”<sup>3</sup> The third is in today’s lesson from Micah. I quote from the New Revised Standard Version because the meaning of the verse is clearer: “You, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel.”<sup>4</sup> The fourth is also from Isaiah: “Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Imman'u-el.”<sup>5</sup>

These words and the time to reflect on them, express what they are thinking by drawing or simply holding a picture, would routinely bring a sense of deep joy to them—unlike the transitory pleasure of unwrapping a new toy. Over the years, I was told by catechists many times that Santa Claus never came up in the atrium. Advent was real for young children. Light in darkness, a star in the sky, a young woman and a child, and one

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<sup>1</sup> Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, trans. Patricia Coulter and Julia Coulter (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992), 138–50.

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 9:2a. NRSV

<sup>3</sup> Numbers 24:17b. NRSV

<sup>4</sup> Micah 5:2a,b.

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 7:14b.

from a little family. “Little” is a word three- to six-year-olds learn to understand early in their lives.

The Reverend Dr. Mark Davis in his online Scripture blog writes about today’s gospel lesson, “This is a rare event in the gospels, when two women are front and center. There are no men in the conversation, and their not-yet-born children are mostly in the background.”<sup>6</sup> They both are prophets in this passage from Luke.

For reasons not entirely clear, the Feast of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary to Elizabeth was omitted from our Prayer Book tradition until the new rites began to appear in the 1960s and 1970s. Its celebration at Saint Mary’s and other Anglo-Catholic parishes dates at least to 1892. It’s found in parish calendar in *The Arrow* as being celebrated on July 2, an earlier date for its celebration on May 31. There are musical records that go back to 1880, but they are too fragile to be opened by anyone other than a conservator. I would not be surprised to learn that the feast here goes back to 1871, the first July in the first church.

With the publication of the Prayer Book in 1549, two canticles—songs—from Luke’s gospel were appointed for daily use at Evening Prayer, the Song of Mary and the Song of Simeon—he greeted the Christ child at his presentation in the temple. The present Prayer Book permits other canticles to be used, but I don’t think I’ve ever attended a service of Evening Prayer when people aren’t using the Song of Mary and the Song of Simeon.

C. Kavin Rowe is professor of New Testament at Duke Divinity School. My first encounter with his work was a reference in Paul Bradshaw and Maxwell Johnson’s *Feasts, Fasts and Seasons in Early Christianity*.<sup>7</sup> In their final chapter on Marian devotion, they directed us to an article by Professor Rowe as perhaps the earliest reference to Marian devotion: the words

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<sup>6</sup> Mark Davis, <https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2012/12/two-prophetic-women-lord-and-leaper.html>, (accessed 19 December 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts and Seasons in Early Christianity* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011), 198.

spoken by Elizabeth to Mary.<sup>8</sup> This is the literal translation of her words by Dr. Mark Davis: “And whence is this to me that the mother of my lord should come to me?”<sup>9</sup> Dr. Davis does not capitalize l-o-r-d. Professor Rowe goes where Dr. Davis did not go. Rowe asks, what Hebrew or Aramaic word is being translated by the Greek word *κύριος* in Luke-Acts—and in the rest of the New Testament? The answer, the unspoken sacred name, rendered only with the consonants Y-H-W-H. No one is sure what the vowels would have been. Mary’s visit to Elizabeth was about their future and the future of humankind.

Since the pandemic began, we no longer read Daily Morning Prayer publicly. So, I have taken my pencil to my copy of *Daily Office Book* and marked through the three places the sacred Hebrew name for God is spelled out with vowels for us to say it aloud.<sup>10</sup> In its place, I’ve written “LORD”—with small caps. I don’t think Paul, not to mention Jesus and his disciples, ever spoke the sacred name aloud. Confession: In private, I also drop the word “hard” before the word “wood” in a collect we use at Saint Mary’s on Wednesdays and Fridays. When I hear “hard” followed by “wood,” I think of flooring, not Jesus’ cross.

I close my sermon with a few words of appreciation for our founding rector, Thomas McKee Brown, who died on Tuesday, December 19, 1898, in the rectory from pneumonia. A moving account of his death is available in the January 1899 issue of *The Arrow* on the parish archives page who had a vision of what worship could be—a work of God that could reach into the souls of men, women and children of all backgrounds and races.

I know a priest who was a layman with a partner around 1960. They were both in their thirties. They both attended faithfully Saint Mary’s. His partner dropped dead of a heart attack while running in Central Park. The only place in their world that their life together could be celebrated was here. A day never goes by without my prayers for this parish. Thank you

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<sup>8</sup> C. Kavin Rowe, “Luke and the Trinity: An Essay in Ecclesial Biblical Theology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 56 (2003), 1–26.

<sup>9</sup> Davis.

<sup>10</sup> *Daily Office Book* (New York: Church Publishing, 1986, 2002), See 137–38.

for your love for our Lord and for this parish in this place. May its doors always be open. God bless us all.

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

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