

THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

Genesis = JEN-uh-sihs

This reading contains some of the conclusions of one of the foundational narratives of our faith. Because it is a very familiar story, slow your recitation slightly to emphasize its richness.

The shifting of blame from Adam to Eve and then from Eve to the serpent is crucial to the reading's drama. You can locate this shift in the repetition of the word "woman."

Here, the scorn is heaped on the serpent. The punishment God metes out is as cruel as it is deserved.

READING I

Today's reading from Genesis, which focuses on the primeval account of the origins of human sinfulness, opens with God strolling through his beautiful garden. Certainly, some time has passed since Adam and Eve committed their sin of disobedience, since Adam exhibits both fear and shame for being naked. When God begins to question Adam, it is important to notice how the blame is passed from Adam to the woman to the serpent. Thus, in addition to fear and shame the sin of denial of responsibility, or

LECTIONARY #689

READING I Genesis 3:9–15, 20

A reading from the Book of Genesis

After the man, **Adam**, had **eaten** of the **tree**,
the **LORD** God **called** to the man and **asked** him,
"Where are you?"

He answered, "I **heard** you in the **garden**;
but I was **afraid**, because I was **naked**,
so I **hid myself**."

Then he asked, "Who **told** you that you were **naked**?
You have **eaten**, then,
from the **tree** of which I had **forbidden** you to **eat**!"

The man replied, "The **woman** whom you **put here** with me—
she **gave me fruit** from the **tree**, and so I **ate it**."

The **LORD** God then asked the **woman**,
"Why did you **do** such a **thing**?"

The woman answered, "The **serpent** **tricked me** into it,
so I **ate it**."

Then the **LORD** God said to the **serpent**:

"**Because** you have done this, you shall be **banned**
from all the **animals**
and from all the **wild creatures**;
on your **belly** shall you **crawl**,
and **dirt** shall you **eat**
all the **days** of your **life**."

the failure to own up to one's mistakes, is revealed in the passing of blame.

With the sins committed in Eden comes the introduction of judgment into the world. Now God must decide a punishment according to participation in the sin. The author of Genesis is very careful to pair the punishment with the life experience of each sinner. God begins by punishing the snake and separating it from all other animals by making it crawl on its belly; it is therefore cursed by a perpetual posture of humility, unable to stand aright. The serpent will no longer hold a persuasive influ-

ence over God's human creatures. Between the serpent and the human there will now be "enmity." This state of discord will continue throughout all subsequent generations of the woman's offspring, meaning that humans forever more will have to contend with the ugliness of sin in their lives.

Today's reading omits the verses in which God doles out punishments for both Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:16–19). God turns first to the woman and punishes her with intense pain in childbearing as well as having to toil with domination imposed by a husband (Genesis 3:16). Finally, God speaks

enmity = EN-mih-tee = mutual hatred

The reading ends with Eve being named. The shift from “woman” to “Eve” feels significant. Convey this in your reading.

For meditation and context:

I will put **enmity** between you and the woman,
and between your **offspring** and hers;
he will **strike** at your **head**,
while you **strike** at his **heel**.”

The man called his wife **Eve**,
because she became the **mother** of **all the living**.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Psalm 98:1, 2–3ab, 3cd–4 (1)

R. Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous deeds.

Sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done wondrous deeds;	All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation by our God.
His right hand has won victory for him, his holy arm.	Sing joyfully to the LORD, all you lands; break into song; sing praise.

The LORD has made his salvation known:
in the sight of the nations he has
revealed his justice.
He has remembered his kindness and
his faithfulness
toward the house of Israel.

READING II Ephesians 1:3–6, 11–12

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Ephesians

Brothers and sisters:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
who has **blessed** us in Christ
with **every spiritual blessing** in the **heavens**,
as he chose us **in him**, before the **foundation** of the **world**,
to be **holy** and without **blemish** before him.
In love he destined us for adoption to himself
through **Jesus Christ**,
in accord with the **favor** of his will,
for the **praise** of the **glory** of his **grace**
that he **granted** us in the **beloved**. >>

Ephesians = ee-FEE-zhuhnZ

Blessed = BLES-uhd
blessed = blesd

An exhortatory reading. Notice the three divisions: “Blessed be the God and Father . . .,” “In love he destined us . . .,” and “In him we were also chosen.” Use these divisions to organize your reading.

Slight emphasis on “praise,” “glory,” and “grace.”

to Adam and bestows upon him the punishment of having to struggle with the land in order to produce food to eat (Genesis 3:17–19). The story ends on a positive note, as punishment gives way to hope for new life. Adam names the woman Eve because she will be the “mother of all the living.” Thus, even though sin has entered the world and has marred the beauty of perfection with the sins of disobedience, fear, shame, and denial, God will not abandon his creation—life will triumph over sin.

READING II

The Letter to the Ephesians is one of several documents that is said to have been written by Paul but most likely was penned by one of his disciples ten or so years after his death. Unlike many of the letters in which Paul writes to a Christian community to challenge their behavior, the Letter to the Ephesians is constructed to champion several important facets of Christian doctrine.

In this particular portion of Ephesians, the subject matter revolves around the topic of “predestination.” The author states that God “chose us in him [Christ], before

the foundation of the world.” The intention of this choice is so that we may live lives of holiness. Furthermore, the author suggests that it is not simply a predetermined choice for us to stand before God without stain, but rather, in time God is able to exercise his love by uniting us with his Son. In other words, God’s love for us is bestowed as an act of mercy, which we can acknowledge by giving him all praise and glory. Paul challenges the Ephesians to recognize the abundance of God’s grace that has been bestowed upon them through their faith in Christ. While they have been chosen, they

This is Paul's point.

You are assuring the assembly of this first hope.

A narrative reading of one of the most solemn passages in the Gospels, which is also one of the most frequently depicted by artists through the centuries. It's very easy to visualize as a result. Treat it like a pageant.

Because these words are so familiar from prayer, they can have a new life in the context of this reading.

"Most High" and "no end" share a rhythmical and thematic echo.

must respond with their gift of constant thanksgiving.

As we celebrate the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, it is important to reflect upon the abundance of grace that God poured upon Mary, whom he predestined to be the mother of his Son. The Letter to the Ephesians suggests that those chosen in Christ are destined to keep God's will and thereby "exist for the praise of his glory." Our purpose as disciples is to radiate the goodness of God every moment of the day. We are invited to contemplate the mystery of Mary's Immaculate Conception

In **him** we were also **chosen**,
destined in accord with the **purpose** of the One
 who **accomplishes** all things according to the **intention**
 of his **will**,
 so that we might **exist** for the **praise** of his **glory**,
 we who **first hoped** in Christ.

GOSPEL Luke 1:26–38

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke

The angel **Gabriel** was sent from God
 to a **town** of **Galilee** called **Nazareth**,
 to a **virgin betrothed** to a man named **Joseph**,
 of the **house** of David,
 and the **virgin's name** was Mary.
 And coming to her, he said,
 "**Hail, full of grace!** The **Lord** is with **you**."
 But she was **greatly troubled** at what was **said**
 and **pondered** what sort of **greeting** this might be.
 Then the **angel** said to her,
 "**Do not be afraid**, Mary,
 for you have found **favor** with God.
Behold, you will **conceive** in your womb and **bear** a son,
 and you shall **name him** Jesus.
 He will be **great** and will be called **Son** of the **Most High**,
 and the **Lord God** will give him the **throne**
 of David his **father**,
 and he will **rule over** the house of **Jacob forever**,
 and of his **Kingdom** there will be **no end**."
 But **Mary** said to the **angel**,
 "How can this be,
 since I have **no relations** with a **man**?"

because in her we see the perfect example of one who exists for nothing other than the praise of God's glory. In the Gospel passage that follows, the angel Gabriel proclaims Mary to be "full of grace." Although we, unlike Mary, are born into this world with the stain of original sin and struggle to free ourselves of temptation and sin each day, we are also called to discover God's grace in every moment of our lives.

GOSPEL

Both the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke contain an infancy narrative that begins

with signs of Jesus' conception. With that said, Matthew and Luke intend to use the signs of the Lord's birth for different purposes. Matthew emphasizes the role of Joseph and his righteousness in preparing for Jesus' birth, whereas in Luke, this role is transferred to Mary. She is the one who receives a message from the angel and then runs to her cousin Elizabeth to announce to her all of the wonders that God has done for her.

The Gospel passage we read today is Luke's account of the annunciation, when the angel Gabriel appears to Mary and

This is the good news that Gabriel delivers to Mary.

Mary's declaration defines the role of all believers, including the Church.

TO KEEP IN MIND

Pause after you announce the book of the Bible at the beginning of the reading. Pause again after the reading, before you proclaim the concluding statement ("The Word of the Lord" or "The Gospel of the Lord").

And the **angel** said to her in **reply**,
 "The **Holy Spirit** will **come upon** you,
 and the **power** of the **Most High** will **overshadow** you.
 Therefore the **child** to be **born**
 will be called **holy**, the **Son of God**.
 And **behold**, Elizabeth, your relative,
 has **also conceived** a son in her old age,
 and this is the **sixth month** for her who was called **barren**;
 for **nothing** will be **impossible** for God."
 Mary said, "**Behold**, I am the **handmaid** of the **Lord**.
 May it be **done to me** according to **your word**."
 Then the **angel departed** from her.

reveals God's plan for her. We are led to ponder the grace of Mary's sinlessness by focusing on her humble response to the angel: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." Mary is the new Eve who is given the fullness of God's grace. However, unlike Eve, Mary remains obedient to God's voice throughout her life. Mary deserved to be fearful at what the angel spoke to her, but she listened and obeyed.

While it is important to focus on Mary's obedience, this passage also invites us to reflect upon the nature of God. Why

does God choose Mary to be the mother of his Son? God chooses a lowly virgin peasant girl to be the one who will bear the most precious gift of God's love, his very Son. If God had wanted, God could have been born among us in a very powerful and successful family. Or he could have manifested his divinity in a fully-grown human person. Instead, his grace rested fully upon one who had no standing within her community. As a faithful Jewish girl, Mary was attuned to the working of God within her life. She listened carefully to God's will. Mary spent her life discerning his move-

ment in her life and was well prepared to offer herself as the chosen ark for God's incarnation. Like Mary, we are invited to cooperate fully with God's will, giving our entire lives over in service of his kingdom. S.W.