

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Micah = Mī-kuh

Ephrathah = EF-ruh-thuh

Emphasize the “you” here, and the smallness of Bethlehem. Build to the word “me,” using a warm voice.

Judah = JOO-duh

Pause before “Therefore,” and shift to a more prophetic tone. Stress the verbs in this second section, painting a picture that leads logically to the conclusion of the reading.

The final phrase sums up what this awaited ruler will do and will be. Pronounce the last four words clearly and deliberately.

LECTIONARY #12

READING I Micah 5:1–4a

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Micah

Thus says the LORD:

You, Bethlehem-Ephrathah,
too small to be among the clans of Judah,
from **you** shall **come forth** for **me**
one who is to be **ruler** in Israel;
whose **origin** is from of **old**,
from **ancient times**.

Therefore the Lord will give them up, **until** the time
when she who is to give birth has **borne**,
and the **rest** of his kindred shall **return**
to the **children** of Israel.

He shall **stand firm** and **shepherd** his flock
by the **strength** of the LORD,
in the **majestic name** of the LORD, his God;
and they shall **remain**, for now his greatness
shall reach to the **ends of the earth**;
he shall be peace.

READING I

On this final Sunday of Advent, the themes of hope, expectation, and joy that have been building throughout the season of Advent converge in a reflection on the one who is to be born. The prophetic words of the readings point to and explain the significance and newness of what God is doing.

Micah was a prophet from Moresheth-gath in southern Judah and a contemporary of Isaiah of Jerusalem. He prophesied in the second half of the eighth century bc. His prophecies were expressed in various forms including laments, covenant law-

suits, oracles, and visions. In promoting Bethlehem, as we hear in today’s reading, his lack of affection for Jerusalem and its corruption was evident.

As part of a series of visions, today’s reading focuses on the coming of a new ruler. Micah begins his identification of the new ruler by recalling the ancient place name, Bethlehem-Ephrathah. While the association between Bethlehem (meaning “house of bread” in Hebrew) and Ephrathah (likely designating the direction toward Ephrathah) is somewhat unclear, it nevertheless moves us back to the time of David.

The smallness of David’s hometown and its insignificance recall that God often chose young and insignificant individuals (like Gideon and David) over the expected ruler from more prestigious families, tribes, and places. Although there is a vague allusion to David and that history, the persons and events of the vision remain even more ambiguous: Who is the ruler/shepherd? Who are his kindred? Who is the woman who is to give birth? The answers are not given at the time of Micah; rather, everything in the vision points to the future: these events “shall” happen. This future orienta-

For meditation and context:

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Psalm 80:2–3, 15–16, 18–19 (4)

R. Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.

O shepherd of Israel, hearken,
from your throne upon the cherubim,
shine forth.

Rouse your power,
and come to save us.

Once again, O LORD of hosts,
look down from heaven, and see;
take care of this vine,
and protect what your right hand
has planted,
the son of man whom you yourself
made strong.

May your help be with the man of your
right hand,
with the son of man whom you yourself
made strong.

Then we will no more withdraw from you;
give us new life, and we will call upon
your name.

READING II Hebrews 10:5–10

A reading from the Letter to the Hebrews

Brothers and sisters:

When **Christ** came into the **world**, he said:

**“Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,
but a body you prepared for me;
in holocausts and sin offerings you took no delight.
Then I said, ‘As is written of me in the scroll,
behold, I come to do your will, O God.’”**

First he says, **“Sacrifices and offerings,
holocausts and sin offerings,
you neither desired nor delighted in.”**

These are offered according to the law.

Then he says, **“Behold, I come to do your will.”**

He takes away the **first** to establish the **second**.

By this **“will,”** we have been consecrated
through the **offering** of the **body** of Jesus Christ **once for all**.

Hebrews = HEE-br00Z

The tone of this reading is one of
expectation met.

Help listeners hear the layers in these
quotations by pausing after the word “said”
(both times). Then pause after “O God,”
which will communicate the shift from the
quotation to the author’s explanation.

holocausts = H AHL-uh-kawst
or HOH-luh-kawst

The author has built a timeline of reasoning.
Pause briefly after the word “will,” and then
read the author’s explanation of the before/
after relationship.

tion and ambiguity allowed this prophecy
to be interpreted Christologically by early
Christians seeking to understand Jesus’
identity and the prophecies pointing to his
birth (for example, see Matthew 2:5–6).

READING II The Letter to the Hebrews
offers a profound under-
standing of Christ’s priesthood and sacri-
fice. Focusing on the concept of sacrifice,
we read claims that the sacrifices and sin
offerings “offered according to the law”
were unable to free people who were offer-
ing sacrifice for the guilt of their sin. A priest

and a sacrifice of a completely different
order was required, and the text argues
that only Christ’s obedient self-offering was
able to accomplish the task. To prove the
point, the author of Hebrews reinterprets
the words of Psalm 40:7–9 (Psalm 39:7–9 in
the Septuagint translation). Where the
psalmist originally critiqued sacrifices
offered without the proper disposition, the
use of the psalm in this reading on the lips
of Jesus implies that such sacrifices and sin
offerings could never have the desired
effect. The only effective remedy then,
according to Jesus speaking these words, is

the “body you prepared for me” (clearly
pointing to his incarnation) and his obedient
sacrifice: “I come to do your will.” Hebrews’
reflection on Christ’s obedient sacrifice
serves as a complement to other readings
this Sunday, which predict that the child
Jesus will be great and will be the savior of
his people.

GOSPEL

Luke is a master storyteller.
While he and Matthew both
include an account of Jesus’ birth in their
Gospels, there are many elements in Luke’s
Gospel that are unique to him, such as the

This meeting of the mothers-to-be is filled with wonder and awe at God's saving works—let your tone convey this.

Zechariah = zek-uh-Rĭ-uh

Pay special attention to the phrase "filled with the Holy Spirit." It establishes that Elizabeth's words are prophecies from God. blessed = BLES-uhd

GOSPEL Luke 1:39–45

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke

Mary set out

and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, where she entered the **house of Zechariah** and **greeted Elizabeth**.

When **Elizabeth** heard Mary's greeting, the infant **leaped** in her womb, and **Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit**, cried out in a **loud voice** and said, "**Blessed** are you among **women**, and **blessed** is the **fruit** of your **womb**."

And how does this happen to me, that the mother of **my Lord** should **come** to me? For at the **moment** the **sound** of your **greeting** reached my ears, the infant in my womb **leaped** for **joy**.

Blessed are you who **believed** that what was spoken to you by **the Lord** would be **fulfilled**."

annunciation to Mary and Mary's visit to Elizabeth. The details of these stories and the words of the characters provide unparalleled theological insight into the events surrounding Jesus' birth.

Strategically situated between the two annunciations (to Zechariah and to Mary) and the birth accounts (of John the Baptist and of Jesus), the encounter between Elizabeth and Mary brings together four individuals: two expectant mothers and two infants in utero. While there is very little action apart from Mary's trek to the hill country, much is communicated. Both

Elizabeth and her unborn child assume prophetic roles, as his leaping in the womb fulfills Gabriel's words to Zechariah, identifying John as a prophet (see Luke 1:15). Sensing this leaping, Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. As a prophet, she indicates future blessings even as she acknowledges the blessing that Mary has already received. Thus, Elizabeth rejoices in Mary's blessed role in God's plan for his people. But her words proclaim even more. The source of this blessedness focuses on Mary's unborn child, the "fruit of your womb" and "my Lord." For the first time,

Luke identifies Jesus as Lord. Recalling Mary's yes to the angel at the annunciation (Luke 1:38), Elizabeth's final words emphasize, yet again, Mary's blessedness, for she is the one "who believed." Thus, prepared by the readings this week that the fulfillment of God's promises is near, we now eagerly look with hope to Christmas. S.L.