

Introduction to the day

Cradle and cross are inextricably connected on the fourth Sunday of Advent. Between a lovely tribute to the little town of Bethlehem and Mary's magnificent song of praise, the letter to the Hebrews reminds us in no uncertain terms that Christ's advent is for "the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." It is the kind of tension in which the church always lives as when in holy communion—with high delight—"we proclaim the Lord's death."

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Use this blessing when lighting all four candles.

Praise to you, O God, who lives with us, sharing our flesh and bones.

As Mary waited and Joseph dreamed, so we dream and wait for you.

Bless us and let your face shine upon us, more radiant than these candles,
and more dear than all else we seek.

Restore us when we fail to refuse the evil and choose the good, and banish all our fears.

We pray in the name of Emmanuel, your promised child and our Savior.

Amen.

LIGHTING ADVENT CANDLE *Light One Candle to Watch for Messiah (WOV 630 vs 4)*

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Let us pray. . . .

Stir up your power, O Lord, and come. Take away the hindrance of our sins and make us ready for the celebration of your birth, that we may receive you in joy and serve you always; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever.

Amen

FIRST LESSON: Micah 5:2-5a

The prophet Micah, having pronounced judgment upon Judah, speaks of a future shepherd-king who, like David, will come from the small town of Bethlehem. (Ephrathah refers to the area around Bethlehem.) This king will restore Israel and bring peace. New Testament writers understood this passage to be referring to Jesus.

PSALM: Luke 1:46b-55

You, Lord, have lifted up the lowly. (*Lk. 1:52*)

SECOND LESSON: Hebrews 10:5-10

The author of Hebrews uses the image of religious sacrifice to convey the significance of Christ's coming. Through obedient acceptance of God's will, Christ allows his own body to become the greatest sacrifice of all, one through which we are made a holy people.

GOSPEL: Luke 1:39-55

Elizabeth, John's mother, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, are two women filled with the Holy Spirit and with faith. In Elizabeth's inspired greeting and Mary's song of praise we hear of a saving God who remembers, scatters, lifts up, and fulfills all things.

GOSPEL MESSAGE - Not Fate but Faith

It's easy to take for granted that everything came together just so. With Christmas only days away, the expectant mood of the Advent season turns swiftly to joy. We might as well already be pacing outside the stable as we eagerly anticipate the baby soon to be born. Because we know what happens next, we might even assume that events *had* to unfold exactly the way they did: The angel Gabriel came to Mary, her pregnancy seemed inevitable, and the promises God had made to Israel would be proven complete. We are not likely to give Mary's role in the story a second thought. We assume she had little choice. At least that's the way we often think about her response.

But that's not entirely the way the story goes. The gospel itself doesn't assume as much. Elizabeth certainly doesn't. She acknowledges Mary's willingness to honor the angel's announcement: "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord" (Luke 1:45). For indeed, the angel's words initially confused Mary: none of it seemed to make sense. Her part in the story could have ended there. And yet she is moved by what she hears. Her trust in God's word is neither coerced compliance nor certain knowledge, but a response rooted in trust—not a foregone conclusion but a faithful leaning into the promises presented to her. The story did not have to go the way it did, but Mary trusted that it would.

Often only when we reflect on the journey we've already made, do we fully appreciate the ways God has repeatedly shown up. There's a gift in such moments of clarity. There's also a gift in the realization that even in seemingly impossible circumstances, choices must often be made. This was true for Mary, and also for Jesus. His journey from the cradle to the cross was not fate: it was a series of faithful choices, like Mary's, to trust in God's promises of new life.

THE PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

As we prepare for Emmanuel, God-with-us, let us pray for all people and places that long for God's presence.

God our uniter, increase communication and cooperation in our relationships with those of other traditions and religions. Root your church in the radical message of your incarnation, and enable us to pursue your justice in the world. Lord, in your mercy,

receive our prayer.

God our creator, we praise you for the beauty that surrounds us. Awaken in us a renewed sense of care for the wildlife in our communities. Form us into faithful stewards of what you have made. Lord, in your mercy,

receive our prayer.

God our sovereign, Mary proclaims a new way of life that lifts up the lowly and fills the hungry with good things. Nurture in local governments and municipalities a desire to care for all who are overlooked and ignored. Lord, in your mercy,

receive our prayer.

God our beacon, as the northern hemisphere begins its slow turn toward more daylight, remind us that even in the deepest nights, you are there. Comfort the lonely and bereaved. Hold closely the frightened, anxious, depressed, and ill especially Linda Boland, Ken Fulford, Sandra Gagnon, Shirley Glickman, Donna L. Hoffman, Claude Jeannotte, Cassie Jessup, Bill Lorbetksie, Glenda Panke, Barry Rogers, Marilyn Schneider, Danny Schultz, Doug Sell, Debbie Thom, Ron Thom, Keith Weckwerth, Denita Wolfgram, Elaine Yourth, Harold Yourth, Stephanie Yourth, and those in long term care facilities and senior residences. In this moment of silence we name out loud or in the quiet of our hearts those who need your healing touch. Lord, in your mercy,

receive our prayer.

God our guide, shepherd the leadership of this congregation. Bless the council and staff in discerning future ministry and open their hearts to the voices of the community. Lord, in your mercy,
receive our prayer.

God our life, you remember the promises you have made to your people. In gratitude for those who have died, today we remember our sister Minerva McFarlane, we praise you for your faithfulness throughout history. Lord, in your mercy,
receive our prayer.

Savior of the nations, come, and receive these prayers and the pleas of our hearts, in the name of Jesus Christ.
Amen.

LORD'S PRAYER

BENEDICTION

The Lord bless us and keep us.
The Lord make his face shine on us and be gracious to us.
The Lord look upon us with favor and give us peace.
Amen

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