

Praise for *Food for the Soul*

“Peter Kreeft is a most gifted theologian, but more importantly, he is a man of faith. With this latest book of reflections on the Scripture readings for Mass, he is sharing with us the lights born of a life of prayer and faithful discipleship. It is truly an expression of what Hans Urs von Balthasar called *kniende theologie*, ‘theology on the knees.’ In addition to the solid content, Peter Kreeft’s artfully expressed thought never fails to inspire.”

—**Cardinal Seán O’Malley**, Archbishop of Boston

“Peter Kreeft has no equal with respect to making the deepest truths shine forth with aphoristic brilliance. He is the perfect person to place in the pulpit. Kreeft on the readings for Mass is a match made in heaven.”

—**Joseph Pearce**, Editor of the St. Austin Review and author of *Wisdom and Innocence: A Life of G.K. Chesterton*

“Reading this series is like joining the masterful Peter Kreeft for coffee after Mass to talk about the readings. It’s a wonderful resource that Catholics can pick up and return to again and again throughout the liturgical year, full of wisdom from one of the top guiding lights of our era in the Catholic world.”

—**Dr. Edward Sri**, theologian and author of *A Biblical Walk through the Mass*

“Unfortunately, we have written records of only seven of C.S. Lewis’ sermons. But thank God we now have dozens of reflections from Peter Kreeft, the modern C.S. Lewis, based on the Mass readings throughout the liturgical year. Kreeft’s decades of reading Scripture, teaching students, and loving wisdom shine forth in this compendium, which deserves wide readership by priests and laypeople alike. With his characteristic wit and wisdom, Kreeft offers an invaluable resource in understanding the Scriptures proclaimed in the liturgy. I hope Kreeft’s book finds its way into the hands of every Catholic eager to better understand the readings of Sunday Mass.”

—**Christopher Kaczor**, Professor of Philosophy, Loyola Marymount University, and Fellow of the Word on Fire Institute

“More than a help, this book is a gift to the Church, and the gift is an encounter with Christ, the Word. Not only for priests—although I encourage this book to be used by priests and hopefully also in seminary formation—this book is also for laity and religious. It is for anyone who is seeking to know God more profoundly through prayer and reflection on his Word, helping us in our journey to know him and discern this message of love.”

—**Sr. Josephine Garrett**, Sister of the Holy Family of Nazareth

“Preaching is among the most important tasks of the Church. It is the premiere form of catechesis for the average parishioner and a surefire way to inspire the hearts of God’s people. Today, the faithful are hungering for substantial homilies informed by the Scriptures and Sacred Tradition. This collection of Peter Kreeft’s biblical reflections provides Catholics with a trustworthy and insightful resource in response to this need. With his usual clarity, Kreeft guides the reader in a stirring series of reflections that will prove a valuable asset to any layperson, religious, seminarian, deacon, or priest.”

—**Fr. Blake Britton**, author of *Reclaiming Vatican II: What It (Really) Said, What It Means, and How It Calls Us to Renew the Church*

“Peter Kreeft’s reflections are challenging yet simple, piercing right to the soul with his wit, charm, and heart. If you’re wondering whether or not you need another book offering reflections on the Mass readings, I offer a resounding yes! These reflections show how deeply God loves us through the Word and the Church, ultimately reminding us of the simple fact that the point is not the homily or the prose—the point is Jesus.”

—**Rachel Bulman**, speaker and author of *Becoming Wife: Self-Gift in Matrimony*

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REFLECTIONS ON THE MASS READINGS

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PETER KREEFT

WORD
on FIRE

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INTRODUCTION

Why this book?

Because one of the things we Catholics can learn from Protestants is to sing, from experience and from the heart, this old hymn by Edwin Hodder:

Thy Word is like a garden, Lord, with flowers bright and fair;
And everyone who seeks may pluck a lovely cluster there.
Thy Word is like a deep, deep mine; and jewels rich and rare
Are hidden in its mighty depths for every searcher there.

Thy Word is like a starry host: a thousand rays of light
Are seen to guide the traveler and make his pathway bright.
Thy Word is like an armory, where soldiers may repair
And find, for life's long battle day, all needful weapons there.

O may I love Thy precious Word, may I explore the mine,
May I its fragrant flowers glean, may light upon me shine!
O may I find my armor there, Thy Word my trusty sword,
I'll learn to fight with every foe the battle of the Lord.

Who is this book for?

I wrote this book for three classes of people: enterprising priests, lazy priests, and laity.

It's for enterprising priests who want a "homily helper" that does to their homilies what "Hamburger Helper" does to boring hamburgers.

It's also for lazy priests who want to use my poor brains instead of theirs. I'm practical enough to know that this second category is pretty large. Laziness affects all of us, and we laity don't hold it against you priests very much. So

I think it's okay to take the easy way out and simply draw from my words, though I think it's much better for your people to hear your own words rather than mine. Besides, they're not even very original. Their origin is not in my mind but in the long and deep tradition of the Church. The Church is in the business of farming. Her words are seeds, meant for scattering on many mental soils. Whoever you are, dear reader, both of us are only links in the chain of God's mail delivery.

And this book is also for a third class of people: for the laity who are hungry for more of "the bread of life."

What is a homily?

Protestants have sermons; Catholics have homilies. One difference between them is that sermons are usually doctrinal or topical, while homilies are biblical. They are supposed to be expositions of the biblical texts assigned for Mass, which are the good soul-food that Mother Church puts on the plate of our high chair each Sunday at Mass. (Do you resent that insult? Most two-year-olds do. That just shows how old you are.)

A homily is to the Bible what a slave is to his master, what money is to the things that money can buy, or what ears are to hearing. Its whole, single, simple purpose is to "break the bread" of the Bible as the Mass breaks the bread of Christ's Body. Both the Bible and Christ are called the "Word of God." The Bible is the Word of God on paper; Christ is the Word of God in flesh, and on wood (the wood of the cross). Paper is made out of wood; wood is not made out of paper.

The purpose of a homily depends on the identity of the Bible, which is the master it serves. There are two radically different answers to the question of what the Bible is. Nonbelievers (some of whom call themselves Catholics) believe it is man's words about God; believers believe it is God's Word about man. Believers call it "the Word" in the singular because it is a singular book, the only one that has the authority of divine revelation.

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Nonbelievers see the Bible as human wisdom about God; believers see it as divine wisdom about man. They differ not about the book but about the author. Obviously, men wrote it, but were they God's instruments or not? If so, it has "author-ity" from its primary Author. Like Christ, it has two natures: human and divine. It is the Word of God in the words of men. Fundamentalists deny its human nature and modernists deny its divine nature, just as in the early Church, Docetists denied Christ's human nature and Arians denied his divine nature.

Both Protestants and Catholics believe that the Bible is divine revelation, but Protestants believe that it is the only infallible divine revelation. (If it's divine, it has to be infallible; God may be mysterious and obscure but he makes no mistakes.) Catholics believe that there is also a divinely authorized Church that is to the Bible what a teacher is to a textbook and that the New Testament is part of a larger and earlier Sacred Tradition ("tradition" literally means "hand down"), which Christ handed down to his Apostles, and that he gave them his authority to teach in his name and to appoint their successors (the bishops) through whom they passed on this authority to future generations. The Bible itself says that. Thus, faithful Catholics always interpret the Bible according to the Sacred Tradition of the Church, and vice versa.

A Catholic homilist, then, serves four masters: (1) God, (2) God's Christ, (3) Christ's Church, and (4) the Church's Bible—the Bible because of the Church, the Church because of Christ, and Christ because of God.

Catholics do not skip the third link in that chain—the Church. As St. Augustine said, "I would not believe the Bible unless I believed the Church." For the apostolic Church was the Teacher that (1) authored (wrote) this Book, (2) authorized it (the word "author" is in "authorize"), (3) defined its canon (why these twenty-seven New Testament books and not others?) and (4) continues to interpret it, to break its bread and feed it to us. That is why Catholic homilies are always founded on the Bible.

Homily helpers

Another more obvious difference is that sermons are long (typically between fifteen minutes and an hour), while homilies are short (typically between three and ten minutes). Yet Catholics complain more about their priests' short homilies than Protestants do about their preachers' long sermons. The reason is obvious: homilies are almost always boring. They put us to sleep instead of waking us up, surprising us, shocking us, or challenging us. They are full of platitudes. They are sometimes also insults to our intelligence. They do not tell us anything we did not already know, feel, believe, or appreciate. They make the Church Militant sound like the Church Mumbling. They make the Mystical Body of Christ look like *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. They make Jesus sound like Joel Osteen or Oprah.

But they do have a certain power: they are effective sleeping pills. And unlike other sleeping pills, they cost nothing and are always safe. In fact, they are excruciatingly safe.

Preaching is one of many things we Catholics can learn from Protestants of the old-fashioned kind. (I do not waste my wind on the windy ones, the worldly ones who are so current that they swim with the current, not against it, like dead fish instead of live ones, and who identify religion with the platform of either political party—worshiping either the elephant or the donkey.)

One reason Protestants usually preach better sermons is that they usually know the Bible better than Catholics do. They love it and revere it and are passionate about it. The cynical Catholic's explanation for this is that that's all they've got: *sola scriptura*. No infallible creeds, no ecumenical councils, no authoritative Sacred Tradition, no Mystical Body, no Real Presence, no Mass, no canonized saints, no mystics, no attention paid to Mary or to the angels, no pope, no purgatory, no seven sacraments, no icons, no incense, no holy water, no exorcisms, no Latin, no Gregorian chant, etc. Protestants find Catholicism far too fat. Catholics find Protestantism far too skinny. But though their religion is skinny, their sermons are fatter. Imagine a Mass that

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ended with the homily, that had nothing more substantial or supersubstantial than the homily. The homily would have to be bigger and better. But, of course, to a Catholic, that Protestant service would be like an egg without a yolk, or a target without a bull's-eye.

Okay, so somebody should improve our homilies. Somebody should market a “homily helper” to do to homilies what Hamburger Helper does to hamburgers.

But why me? I'm an absent-minded philosophy professor, not a priest or a deacon. I have never preached a homily in a Catholic church. I do not teach biblical theology or homiletics. I am not professionally qualified to write this book.

But I know, from observation, how many people fall asleep during homilies; and I know, from experience, how many Catholics are exercising heroic charity toward their priests in being polite and patronizing and pretending as they endure their mild weekly purgatory.

There are some priests who are very good homilists, but they are very rare. My parish priest preaches excellent homilies, but that is because he was trained and ordained as a Protestant (Anglican) before he became a Catholic.

So the need is clear. How much this book can help, if at all, is not clear. But just maybe it can. And the situation can't get much worse. My friend actually heard an Easter homily in which the priest said that the message Christ was trying to get across to us from the pulpit of the cross was “I'm OK, you're OK.” This is not a joke from Monty Python's *Life of Brian*.

For priests only

If you are a priest, I have one and only one piece of advice for you if you plan to draw from these words of mine. As someone who is not a shepherd (a priest, a deacon, or an expert in homiletics) but just one of the sheep, here is my primary bleat to my shepherds. It does not matter what we think of you, whether you are a good speaker or not, intelligent or not, eloquent or not, or even whether or not you are wise and competent in anything else in this world. The one and

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only thing that will give your homily power is your heart's passion, your love, both of Jesus Christ the shepherd and of us his sheep who desperately need him in our lives.

We're not impressed by your head or your mouth or your hands, but we can't help being impressed by your heart. And you can't help showing it; you can't help wearing your heart on your sleeve. You can't fake your heart, as you can fake your head or your hands. You can't give us what you don't have yourself. If you don't believe this stuff, stop pretending and go back to the school of prayer and ask God for the gift of faith to believe it. If your hope is dim and dull and sleepy, go back and ask God to put that hope in your heart so you can give it to your people. If you don't have a passionate, all-consuming love for Jesus Christ the good shepherd and for every one of his needy, bleat-y sheep, go back and ask God to light a bonfire in your heart. We can be fooled by fake light, but we can't be fooled by fake heat. We can tell how much you mean every word you say. We're still little kids that way. We have surprisingly good baloney detectors. We can read our spiritual fathers just as we can read our biological fathers. Let us see your heart. Don't be afraid or embarrassed. We're not your judges—God is. If you're afraid to be embarrassed in front of us now, you're going to be embarrassed in front of him at the Last Judgment.

The heart of your target as a homilist is the heart of each person who hears your homily. God aims at the heart, which is the center of the soul and the source of its life just as the physical heart is the source and center of the life of the body.

So your homily should be heart to heart. "Heart speaks to heart"—that was St. John Henry Newman's personal motto because he knew it was God's. (But as Newman knew well, that does not decrease the importance of the mind and intelligence but increases it. The mind is the heart's closest counselor.)

Christ is the one who sews hearts to God and to each other. Therefore, like the Scriptures they "unpack," homilies should be centered on Christ. If there is one thing we Catholics need always to be reminded of by Evangelical Protestants, it is Christocentrism. And since Christ is both the historical Jesus

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and the eternal “Logos,” the “Word” or “language” of God, the light of truth who “enlightens everyone” (John 1:9), Christians defend the “logocentrism” that “deconstructionists” denounce. Their logophobia is really a Christophobia.

Scripture uses the term “Word of God” both for itself and for Christ. The Bible is the gold mine and Christ is the gold. Therefore, St. Jerome says that “ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.” Christ is the central point of Scripture and also the “big picture” or frame surrounding it. So if homilies are to be faithful to the scriptural bread that they break open, Christ must be both the center and the surrounding frame for every homily. They are to be looked along, not looked at. They are pointing fingers, words of men that point to the Word of God.

The content of the book

Some of these reflections try to connect the different readings for each Sunday Mass—the Old Testament reading, the epistle, and the Gospel—and some do not. The readings were put together, in the mind of the Church, for a reason. However, to be perfectly frank, sometimes the reason and the connection is not clear, at least not to me. So I don’t always “push the envelope” and strain to see a unity I don’t really see very well. But even then, the main point of each of the separate readings is clear, and one arrow is enough to pierce a heart.

The reason God sent his Son into our world, the reason he founded his Church and instituted the Mass, the reason for everything he has done for us, is to consummate our spiritual marriage to him: a living, personal, joyful, faithful, hopeful, and love-full relationship with God that is totally encompassing, both individual and social, both private and public, both body and soul, both invisible and visible, both spiritual and sacramental, both through hierarchy and through equality, both intellectual and moral, both rational and mystical, both in this world and in the next. That is the reason for everything he has done, from banging out the Big Bang to my writing and your reading these tiny little pops that are its remotest echoes.

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Use them, choose them, and lose them as you will. Some will “work” better, some worse. My words as well as my ideas are given to you for God’s glory, not mine or yours.

ADVENT

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Today is New Year's Day in the Church's calendar because the Church defines the year by the most important event in history: the Incarnation of God into the world by the birth of Christ. Advent is the month-long preparation for that event. Jesus is the central character of history. He is also its author. All of history is his-story.

"Advent" means "coming." Christ came into this world two thousand years ago. He promised that he will have a "second coming," or second advent, at the end of time. We do not know the day or the hour of Christ's second advent, when he will come to judge the whole world, but we do know that he will come, and that is how the world of time will end. One day will be the last day.

We also know that he will come for each one of us individually on the last day of our life, but we do not know that day either; therefore, we must be ready every day of the present for both future comings, to the world and to ourselves, because we do not know if tonight will be the world's last night or if tonight will be our last night. Nothing makes you wiser than honestly facing that truth. They say death and taxes are the only two certainties, but that's not true. Many people escape taxes. But nobody can escape death.

There is also a third coming of Christ. His first coming was in the past, and his second coming will be in the future; but his third coming is in the present. At this very moment, he is knocking on the door of your heart and asking permission to come in and be your Lord and Savior. He is a gentleman and does not come by force, only by your permission, granted by your free will. He will not rape your soul, but he wants to make love to it and impregnate it with his life. That's why, in that famous picture of Christ holding a lantern and knocking on a door, there is no doorknob on the outside of the door. It's on the inside. Opening the door of our hearts to his presence, his love, his grace, his very life, is the single most important thing anyone can ever do in this world. It is the whole meaning of life, and the secret of what every human being wants: joy—that is, a happiness that is true and deep and lasting, not just fake and shallow and fragile.

Advent

When we pray the “Hail Mary,” we ask Mary to pray for us at the two most important moments of our life: “now and at the hour of our death.” “The hour of our death” is Christ’s second coming. That’s what we are supposed to be preparing for during the Advent season, as well as preparing for our celebration of his first coming at Christmas. And “now” is what we call his third coming, into our hearts and lives.

It is his first coming that we celebrate at Christmas and anticipate during Advent. But the very same person, Jesus Christ, who came to our world two thousand years ago in Mary’s womb as a zygote and who will come to us personally when we die as our Savior, is also coming to us at this very moment, knocking on the door of our hearts—right now, as I speak these words, and right here, on the very seat you are sitting on. It’s up to us to say yes to him. That is your terrifying and wonderful power and responsibility. He said, “I am the door” (John 10:9 RSV-CE), and he put the doorknob into your hands.

That’s what he established his Church for: to help us to do that. We don’t do it alone. We do it aided by saints and sacraments, angels and ancestors, the Mass and the Madonna.

And all three comings, all three advents, have the same purpose: to fill us with his life, to make us into little Christs, to make us saints. The great Catholic writer Léon Bloy said: “Life has only one tragedy, in the end: not to have been a saint.” That’s the meaning of life, that’s why he came, that’s why he put us here on earth. And a saint is but simply someone who loves God with his whole heart and his neighbor as himself. He made that very clear, both in his words in the Bible and in the teachings of his Church and in the lives of the saints and in the deepest voice of our own conscience.

So let’s get on with it. Let’s keep our hand on the doorknob and our ears open to his knocks.

FIRST READING

JEREMIAH 33:14-16

The days are coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and Judah. In those days, in that time, I will raise up for David a just shoot [RSV-CE: “righteous Branch”]; he shall do what is right and just in the land. In those days Judah shall be safe and Jerusalem shall dwell secure; this is what they shall call her: “The LORD our justice” [RSV-CE: “righteousness”].

The irony of this prophecy is that God is telling his chosen people, through Jeremiah his prophet, that they will be “safe” and “secure” just before the city of Jerusalem and the whole nation of Israel was about to be invaded, conquered, and destroyed by their perennial enemies the Babylonians. This safety and security that Jeremiah speaks of would not come by politics or warfare but by the coming Messiah, the promised one, David’s righteous seed.

When Christ, the son of David, came to earth, he was not a political, economic, or military leader, and he did not save Israel from the Romans, who were taking away their political freedom through their repressive laws, their wealth through their exorbitant taxes, and their power through their overwhelming military superiority, just as the Babylonians had done centuries ago in Jeremiah’s time. Jesus did not save Israel from the Romans, but he did save his people from her true enemies, her much worse enemies: from her sins. Her material enemies could only take away Israel’s material goods and freedoms, and only for a little while. Her spiritual enemies could take away her spiritual goods and freedoms, and not just for a time but for eternity.

Those who were wise enough to know that their worst enemies were their sins recognized Jesus as their Savior when he came. That’s what they most wanted and that’s what they got. Those whose hearts were unwise and set on merely worldly success did not recognize Jesus as their Savior, because Jesus did not save them from the worldly goods that they wanted.

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That's why Jesus' first question to his future disciples, his very first public words in John's Gospel, were "What do you seek?" (John 1:38 RSV-CE). He questions our heart because that's what he came to seek and to save.

It's ironic. We think we are questioning him but he is really questioning us. We think we are asking him, Are you the answer to our question? But he is really asking us, Are you the question to my answer?

Still today many Christians are making the same mistake and identifying Christianity with political success, with a political party. The devil doesn't care whether you worship the donkey or the elephant, as long as you don't worship the Christ.

God's promise through Jeremiah applies to us as well as to the Jews. That promise makes us safe and secure, as Jeremiah says, but not from war, military conquest, oppression, or even temporal death. We are freed from eternal death.

And that has temporal consequences. Our assurance of eternity makes a difference to our fears about time. Our headaches hurt less when we know we've been cured of our cancer. Of course, we still quite naturally and properly fear all kinds of sufferings and failures in our future, which we don't know. But we do know that if we are in Christ, God makes "all things work for good" (Rom. 8:28) for us both in time and in eternity because through Christ, God has made us his children and has made himself our heavenly Father. We don't know how many sharp stones are ahead on our path, but we know where the path leads—to him, to heaven, to home. We know that God cannot lie. He fulfills all his promises. And he not only fulfills them, he refills them, like jumbo drinks. As Mother Teresa loved to say, God cannot be outdone in generosity.

When God says, through Jeremiah, "I will fulfill the promise I made," he brings together the past, the present, and the future, and he also brings together our faith, hope, and love. God's promises are made in the past, and they are the object of our faith. They will be fulfilled in the future and that is the object of our hope. And they guide our lives in the present, where God and our neighbors, who are our brothers and sisters in his family, are the objects of our love.

That is the three-part outline of the books of the Bible, both the Jewish

First Sunday of Advent

Scriptures, the Old Testament, and the Christian Scriptures, the New Testament. First come the Torah and the historical books, which tell us what God did in the past. Then come the wisdom books, which are guidance for our lives in the present. Last come the prophetic books, which tell us what God will do in the future.

God transcends time, and he is present in all times, past and present and future. Nothing in the past is dead and gone to God, as it is to us. And nothing in future is not yet real, not yet born, to God, as it is to us. To God, nothing is “no longer” or “not yet.”

But God’s actions in our temporal world and in our temporal lives are either past or present or future. Advent is about three advents, three comings of God to us in Christ: First, in the past, in history, in his first coming, recorded in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, which record the history of the early Church. Second, in the present, in our lives, for which the epistles give us wisdom and guidance. And third, in the future, at the end of time, which is promised in the prophetic book of Revelation.

Just as God is inescapable in space—there is no place where we can hide from him—so he is inescapable in time. He comes to us out of our past. The Christ we receive in Holy Communion is the Christ who died and rose for us two thousand years ago. And he comes to us in our present: in his providence in our lives and in our contact with him in our prayers, especially in the Mass. And he comes to us even out of our future, for that is what a promise is: the guarantee about the future. He promises that he will never leave us or forsake us.

Our loves are fickle, and human guarantees and promises are not infallible. But God’s love is guaranteed, infallible, and unchangeable. If we believe that, we understand why Jeremiah said, even in the face of the coming Babylonian invasion, that “Judah shall be safe and Jerusalem shall dwell secure.” For there are only three things God cannot do: God cannot lie, God cannot sin, and God cannot fail.

SECOND READING

I THESSALONIANS 3:12–4:2

Brothers and sisters: May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we have for you, so as to strengthen your hearts, to be blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones. Amen.

Finally, brothers and sisters, we earnestly ask and exhort you in the Lord Jesus that, as you received from us how you should conduct yourselves to please God and as you are conducting yourselves you do so even more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

The reading from Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians today is about progress—a fitting theme for Advent, when we look to the three comings of Christ: our commemoration of his past coming two thousand years ago, which we call Christmas; his second coming at the end of the world, which leads to the Last Judgment; and his present coming into our lives, in our faith, our hope, and above all our charity.

It is this present coming that St. Paul speaks of here. That's what Jean-Pierre de Caussade calls "the sacrament of the present moment," in his beautiful little classic on the spiritual life entitled *Abandonment to Divine Providence*.

And that present coming of Christ is progressive, like any personal relationship: it has a definite beginning and it continues; if it does not progress, it regresses. Our spiritual lives, our spiritual marriage to God, like a good human marriage, should show spiritual progress.

There are three dimensions of that progress: progress in faith, progress in hope, and progress in charity. That means there should be progress in overcoming the enemies of faith, hope, and charity, which are distrust, despair, and selfishness, or faithlessness, hopelessness, and lovelessness.

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What is progress? Progress is like a graph: it has two dimensions, vertical as well as horizontal. Progress is not just change, any movement forward, but movement upward, change in a positive direction. Running backward across your own goal line with the football is not progress—it's regress. Getting infected with a virus is a change, but it's progress only for the virus, not for you.

What measures change? The goal. Getting a C yesterday and a B today is progress because the goal is an A. Progress means moving closer to your goal.

What is the goal that measures progress for a Christian? What are we supposed to become in the end? We pray, in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Heaven is our standard. We are to become more heavenly, more like what we will be in heaven.

This means to become more real, more human, and more holy. Those are three ways of saying the same thing.

More real because we have to be increased, we have to become more solid, more like a rock and less like a cloud. Thus Paul says, "May the Lord make you increase." May God make you more full, more real, more strong, and more solid—more like a saint and less like a ghost.

More human because it's love that makes us human, and lovelessness that makes us inhuman. So St. Paul says, "May the Lord make you . . . abound in love for one another." That is how we become more human. Only human beings can love because only human beings have free choice. Nothing else in the universe that we know of has the free will to choose to make itself more itself or less itself. Rocks can't choose to be more or less rocky and dogs can't choose to be more or less doggy, but humans can choose to be more human or less human, by choosing to love or not to love.

This love is charity. Charity is not just our spontaneous feelings. It does not arise from our nature as selfish animals. It is a gift of God. So St. Paul prays for it, as we should too. He prays that God may "strengthen your hearts, to be blameless in holiness."

The Christian answer to the question of the meaning of life is very simple: the meaning of life is to become a saint. And we don't make ourselves

saints—God does. God is the saint-maker. But we have to ask him, we have to want that. He gives that gift to whoever asks for it. It's of that gift that he says, "Seek and you will find . . . [for] the one who seeks, finds" (Matt. 7:7–8). He says, "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness / for they will be satisfied" (Matt. 5:6).

Why does it happen only through love? Because as St. Augustine says, love is our gravity, love is what moves us, what motivates us to move: our love of the end that we move toward. For instance, if we see an ugly dog and a beautiful dog, we move away from the ugly dog, and we move toward the beautiful dog to pet it. Augustine defines evil as disordered love, and good as rightly ordered love: loving God with the love of adoration, our neighbors with charity, and the things of the world with moderation, to use them but not give our whole hearts to them. We are to use things and love persons, not use persons and love things. We are to adore God and use creatures, not adore creatures and try to use God. That's rightly ordered love.

St. Paul says this love "increases" us. Our souls, like our bodies, are meant to grow, to progress, not just to stay static. How awful would it be if a baby never grew up? That's as true of our souls as it is of our bodies. And this growing up in the soul is the most important meaning of progress, not the growing of our technology or of our income or of our Facebook image. (I call it "Fakebook," not "Facebook," for we don't show our true face to our digital friends, we don't open our hearts to people we hardly know, but only to our real friends.)

Here's my definition of progress: the more we love, the bigger we are. The more we love what is bigger than ourselves—the more we love God and our families—the bigger we become. But the more we love what's less than ourselves—our stuff, our money, and our pleasures and conveniences—the smaller we become. We become what we love. The more you love Christ, the more you become like Christ. The more you love an idol, the more you become like it. The true God frees you if you give your heart to him. False gods enslave you and addict you if you give your heart to them. That's true not only if they're bad things, like drugs, gossip, pornography, but even if they're good things, like money, cars, houses,

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and clothes. The more you idolize anything else, the less free you are. You're a slave to whatever you can't part with that's less than yourself. It's all determined by your heart, by your love. That is the source of true progress and regress.

St. Paul writes, "May the Lord . . . strengthen your hearts." What does he mean by "hearts"? Our hearts are the very centers of our souls. The heart is to the soul what the blood-pumping organ is to the body: it is the source of its life. The size of our heart is what makes us more or less real. It makes us "increase." That's Paul's word for it, his word for progress—true progress, personal progress, inner progress. Inner growth, spiritual growth. Scientific progress, economic progress, educational progress—these are all very good, of course, but they're all examples of progress in something less than ourselves, in the things in our world that we know by science, control by technology, or possess by economics. We need these things, but we need most of all to progress in what we are, not just in what we have or what we do.

Who judges that real progress? Christ. We can avoid the truth of his judgment now, but no one can avoid the Last Judgment, when he comes again, at the end of time, or the particular judgment at the end of our time, at death. We only get one life: "Only one life, 'twill soon be past, Only what's done for Christ will last."

Does that sound preachy and simplistic and fairy tale-ish? Well, if that's not true, then the whole Christian religion is the world's biggest fake. And if it is true, then the meaning and measure of progress is nothing less than Christ, not technology or votes or dollars or even years of life.

Don't get all As in all your subjects but flunk life. Study for your final exam: read the Bible.

GOSPEL

LUKE 21:25–28, 34–36 _____

Jesus said to his disciples: "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth nations will be in dismay, perplexed by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the world,

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for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. But when these signs begin to happen, stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand.

“Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life, and that day catch you by surprise like a trap. For that day will assault everyone who lives on the face of the earth. Be vigilant at all times and pray that you have the strength to escape the tribulations that are imminent and to stand before the Son of Man.”

Well, today’s Gospel certainly does not sound at all like the secular gospel of automatic progress by political and technological engineering, progress to an ever safer and more pleasant and comfortable heaven on earth. Jesus uses the words “dismay,” “perplexed,” “fright,” and “shaken.” I wonder which prophecy is more likely to come true: his or that of our secular society?

Yet despite the terror Jesus describes, he says we should “stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand.” For it is the coming of our Redeemer, Christ. For all who are his friends, this “great and terrible day of the LORD” (Joel 2:31 RSV-CE) will be terribly good and glorious. For all who are not, it will be terrifying.

The same Christ will do opposite things to opposite people just by being himself: he is light, the light of the world; he can no more turn off the light that he is than the sun can. And therefore he will bless and bliss those who love the light and he will be unendurable to those who love darkness more than light. The same event—Christ’s second coming—will make some men “die of fright” and will make others almost die of joy because they will see their Lord coming to them with “power and great glory.”

Jesus says there will be “signs” of his coming in both the heavens and the earth. The Greek word for “signs” also means “miracles,” so these “signs” are not just natural events like tornadoes and earthquakes, meteor showers

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and solar eclipses. They are miracles. And what all of Christ's miracles point to is himself, who he is, the miracle-working God. The first time he came, it was possible to disbelieve in him. Only Mary, Joseph, and some animals saw him come into the world the first time. It was easy to ignore him. He hid his divinity behind his humanity, as he now hides both his divinity and humanity behind the appearances in the Eucharist. But no one will be able to ignore him when he comes the second time. The Bible says, "Every eye will see him" (Rev. 1:7). He will come in his full heavenly glory. It will be the greatest event of all time, the consummation of the whole story of human history.

A century ago, the editors of all the leading newspapers in America were polled and asked what was the headline they would most like to be able to print? One of them said: "Christ Comes Again!" No newspaper today would dare to say that.

Christ does not tell us the specific details or the time of his second coming. He does not tell us the details because, like a good novelist or scriptwriter, he uses the power of suggestion, which is addressed to our imagination, rather than a literal, scientific description, which is only addressed to our senses or to our factual curiosity. He does not tell us the time because he wants us to be ready at all times; ready, too, to die at all times, because our death will be the end of our world.

You may not live to see the end of the world, but you will certainly live to see the end of your world. Are you ready? Are you ready to die? That's not preachy, that's practical. In fact, there is nothing more practical than getting ready for the one and only event in your life that is absolutely guaranteed.

How can you get ready? Repent. Pray. Be reconciled to God. Go to confession. Remember the parable of the five wise virgins who were ready for the bridegroom's coming and the five foolish virgins who weren't (Matt. 25:1-13).

Meanwhile, he is giving us time, time to repent and believe, time to turn our whole life over to him. Some day, our time will run out. We get only one lifetime. There is no reincarnation. There is no second chance to say yes to Christ after time runs out, either for the world or for you.

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Some night will be the world's last night. If he comes tonight, will you be ready to meet him?

Why are we reading this Gospel passage today? Because the Church uses the beginning of Advent, which is the beginning of our liturgical year, to remind us of our end.

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

FIRST READING

BARUCH 5:1-9

Jerusalem, take off your robe of mourning and misery;
put on the splendor of glory from God forever:
wrapped in the cloak of justice from God,
bear on your head the mitre
that displays the glory of the eternal name.
For God will show all the earth your splendor:
you will be named by God forever
the peace of justice, the glory of God's worship.

Up, Jerusalem! stand upon the heights;
look to the east and see your children
gathered from the east and the west
at the word of the Holy One,
rejoicing that they are remembered by God.
Led away on foot by their enemies they left you:
but God will bring them back to you
borne aloft in glory as on royal thrones.
For God has commanded
that every lofty mountain be made low,
and that the age-old depths and gorges
be filled to level ground,
that Israel may advance secure in the glory of God.
The forests and every fragrant kind of tree
have overshadowed Israel at God's command;

for God is leading Israel in joy
by the light of his glory,
with his mercy and justice for company.

This prophecy has three different but related meanings, three historical fulfillments. First, it refers to the Jews' return to Jerusalem from their exile in Babylon. Second, that event is a symbol, shadow, sign, or foretaste of the coming of Christ the Messiah to Jerusalem—his first coming. Third, it is also a foreshadowing of his second coming.

All three are concrete, literal historical events, not just abstract poetic symbols. Christianity is not a religion merely of timeless theological truths and moral principles. These are necessary, but they are abstract, while Christianity is concrete because Christ is concrete. Christianity is a religion of real historical events. If the Incarnation and the Resurrection didn't really happen, Christianity is the world's biggest lie, and Jesus Christ is only Santa Claus for grown-ups.

When the prophet Baruch wrote today's prophecy, he did not know that the event he was inspired by God to write about had all three of those meanings. He understood only the first one: the Jews' return from exile to Jerusalem. But God had all three meanings in mind from the beginning. There are always two authors of every passage in the Bible: the human author and the divine author; and the divine author always knows more than the human author does about the words he inspires.

There's a word in this prophecy that describes all three events, and it's a word we almost never use anymore. And that's a shame, because it's a beautiful word for a beautiful concept, and I'm afraid that concept is dying, starving, getting thin and shadowy like a ghost because we don't see it or say it in our lives anymore. The word is "glory."

What is glory? It is not the same as fame. Fame is only human, and it can be shallow, ugly, or wicked. Entertainment people can be famous but shallow.

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The Black Death was famous but horribly ugly. Hitler was famous but wicked. Glory is much more than fame. It's not shallow but profound, it's not ugly but beautiful, and it's not wicked but good.

Glory is mentioned six times in this prophecy. Each time it's ascribed to God: Jerusalem is told to "put on," like a king's robe, "the splendor of glory from God forever," and to bear "the mitre that displays the glory of the eternal name."

The prophet also speaks of "the glory of God's worship." The most glorious thing we can participate in in this world is the Mass.

The prophet also speaks of God's people being "borne aloft in glory as on royal thrones." In heaven we will not only glorify God but God will also glorify us.

Israel is said to "advance secure in the glory of God." Our spiritual warfare is the most glorious of all wars.

And God is said to lead Israel "by the light of his glory." We follow a God who is not only truth and goodness but also beauty.

Scripture often exhorts us to "glorify" God in our prayers and in our lives. That does not mean to give him a glory he doesn't have, like fake advertising, but to rejoice in the glory that he does have. And Scripture says that our destiny in heaven is to be not only justified and sanctified but also glorified, to share in the very glory of God, as a mirror placed before an artistic masterpiece shares in its glory, or—better—as we share in the salty wetness of the sea when we swim in it.

The fact that we find it difficult to define what glory means shows that we no longer find it familiar and natural. The word seems sort of old-fashioned, un-American, medieval, something out of the old myths and fairy tales, something as far away as kings and queens and as legendary as dragons. Yet we still love the old myths and legends. Our hearts are made for them. Tolkien's epic *The Lord of the Rings* was voted the greatest book of the twentieth century by four different polls of readers. And that book is full of glorious things. So we must have some unconscious knowledge of what glory is and some unconscious love of it. What is it? And where do we find it?

The best answer to that question that I know outside of the Bible is a sermon by C.S. Lewis entitled “The Weight of Glory.” Google it when you get home and download it. The answer to where we find it is that we find glory in each other. Here is the last paragraph of that sermon:

The weight of my neighbor’s glory should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken. It is a serious thing to live in a society of potential gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to will one day be a creature which, if you saw it now you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one of the other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never met a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors of everlasting splendors. . . . Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses. If he is your Christian neighbor he is holy in almost the same way, for in him also Christ is truly hidden.



Let’s try to think our way back into the minds of the writers and readers of the Bible, who knew and loved and used that term “glory” more than we do.

It’s hard to define glory, but it’s easy to point to it. You’ve probably experienced it at some time in your life. Perhaps it was a sunset so beautiful that it took your breath away. Or perhaps it was the face of your future wife, who you fell hopelessly in love with the very first time you saw her. Or perhaps

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it was the “northern lights”—the aurora borealis—or a great mountain, or a great storm, or a great meteor shower. Or perhaps it was something that happened among us: an act of forgiveness, a reconciliation, a miraculous recovery, or the return of a prodigal son. Perhaps it was a great piece of music that broke your heart. Perhaps it was a work of art, or a great cathedral, or the color purple.

In pre-modern times, kings and queens had glory. We no longer have kings and queens, but we still have glory, for nature does not change, even though politics does. Old Cape Cod was made by God, but Route 28 was made by the State.

Great glory, like great sorrow, makes us weep, helplessly. “It broke my heart” is the highest compliment you can pay to a work of art. The Psalmist described that effect on the Jews who were freed in today’s Responsorial Psalm: “When the LORD brought back the captives of Zion / we were like men dreaming. / Then our mouth was filled with laughter, / and our tongue with rejoicing” (Ps. 126:1–2). Glory is a gift from heaven, like rain; that’s why it makes our faces wet with tears.

Glory is a kind of beauty, a special kind. Not all beauty is glorious. “Glorious” means a beauty that is great and triumphant and splendid, something surprising, something better than you could have imagined or hoped for. Glory is not just special but extraordinary. Glory is high and holy.

This suggests that all glory is from God, who is the supremely high and holy one, the infinite treasury of glory. As Rabbi Abraham Heschel said, “God is not nice. God is not an uncle. God is an earthquake.” God is like the sun. Glory is to God as sunlight is to the sun. The glimpses of glory we see in this life are little patches of godlight that shine into our dark forest glens.

The most glorious thing of all is *agape* love—total, self-forgetful, self-giving love—because the most glorious thing is God, and God is that love, God’s very being is that love. That equation between glory and love is why the most tragic event that ever happened, Christ’s Passion and death, is also the most glorious: because it was the supreme gift of love, God’s gift of his own life

in exchange for ours. That God himself, the Creator, eternal and perfect and without any needs, should love us so much that he would give himself into the hands of the sinners who tortured and crucified him, for the salvation of those very sinners (us)—nothing is more glorious than that because nothing ever done was more loving than that.

The Resurrection was not the first stage of that victory but the second. Nothing is more glorious than love, and God's love was poured out totally on the cross; therefore, the cross is the most glorious thing that ever happened. That's why we make crucifixes out of gold! It's natural to contrast the gory with the glory, the gory horror of the Crucifixion with the glorious triumph of the Resurrection; but Christ's saving us from sin in the Crucifixion was even more glorious than his saving us from death in his Resurrection because sin is even more unglorious than death. That's why the martyrs refused to sin, to apostatize, even when threatened with death. They were not fools.

The glory of the Resurrection was not a compensation for the lack of glory of the Crucifixion, like an insurance claim that's paid out to compensate for a loss. They were two stages of one and the same thing, the single event we call the "Paschal (or Passover) Mystery." That whole event was glorious because it was the supreme gift of love. The Resurrection just showed, in the visible realm of the body, the glory that was already there in the invisible realm of the spirit. The story as a whole is the Gospel, the Good News of God's astonishing and incredible love. It's the greatest story ever told. No one has ever imagined anything more glorious.

SECOND READING

PHILIPPIANS 1:4-6, 8-11 _____

Brothers and sisters: I pray always with joy in my every prayer for all of you, because of your partnership for the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus. God is my witness, how I long for all

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of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer: that your love may increase ever more and more in knowledge and every kind of perception, to discern what is of value, so that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

The most striking thing in this passage, the thing that can change a large part of our lives, is the assurance “that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus.” It is a great verse for parents to remember when their baptized children seem to drift away from the faith.

Baptism puts an inner mark on the soul, an invisible seal that cannot be erased even when it is disobeyed. It is like a homing pigeon’s instincts to fly home. It is there, like a light in the window of the home of the wandering prodigal. And it can and should be the reason for our hope for the prodigal’s return.

Hope, like faith, is not a scientific, mathematical guarantee, like two plus two always being four. But the object of hope is nothing less than God himself. Baptism is like God’s spiritual brand on what belongs to him. No matter how we struggle against it, we cannot erase it. And the Hound of Heaven never stops chasing us down. Never.

The object of our hope is not a feeling but a fact: the fact that God’s yes is more powerful than our no. As St. Paul said, “Where sin increased, grace overflowed all the more” (Rom. 5:20). God’s mercy is to our sin what the ocean is to a drop of ink. He promised never to abandon us even when we abandon him. So never stop praying the prayer of trust, St. Faustina’s simple prayer, “Jesus, I trust in you,” especially for anyone you love who has left the faith. As Winston Churchill famously said, “Never, never, never, never, never give up.”



The other point in this passage that may be surprising and informative to many people is that love abounds only through something we don't often associate with love—namely, understanding, judgment, and discernment. Love and reason, love and discernment, love and moral discrimination between good and evil, and love and critical questioning about the morality of any action are allies, not enemies. We need both. We need warmer hearts, but we also need cooler heads. We need tenderer hearts, but we also need tougher minds. Soft heads and hard hearts are both very dangerous. As Jesus says, we are to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16 RSV-CE) at the same time. In other words, we are to be like him.

GOSPEL

LUKE 3:1–6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert. John went throughout the whole region of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah:

A voice of one crying out in the desert:

“Prepare the way of the Lord,

make straight his paths.

Every valley shall be filled

and every mountain and hill shall be made low.

The winding roads shall be made straight,

and the rough ways made smooth,

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

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Unbelievers often think of Christianity as a myth, a fairy tale, a legend. They have never read the Gospels. Christianity is rooted in literal history. The Gospels are eyewitness accounts of historical events. In the first few verses of our reading today, Luke gives a plethora of secular historical reference points: five geographical territories; nine proper names, including two high priests and five secular rulers with their official titles; and an exact date.

Our faith is based on facts, on historical events that are recorded in the four Gospels. Some of them are corroborated by secular sources and none of them are contradicted. If these events are not historical facts but creative fictions, man-made myths, pious legends, and moral allegories, then a miracle that is much harder to believe than any of the miracles recorded in these Gospels must have happened: the four Gospel writers, who were two Jewish fishermen, one Jewish tax collector, and one Greek doctor, together invented the totally new and modern literary form of realistic fantasy, almost two thousand years before Tolkien, and wrote the most powerful, convincing, life-changing, world-changing fantasy in history that was the biggest con job in history and was stupidly swallowed and mistaken for historical fact by billions of people of all kinds including the most intelligent and critical and rational thinkers who ever lived. Now that is really a fantasy!

The Gospels are unique. There is nothing like them in all the literature of the world, religious or secular. This is shown by the fact that all fictional novels about Jesus as the main character are ridiculously, embarrassingly bad. They are usually written by Protestant fundamentalists. There have been good novels written about every other famous character in history—fictional novels about factual persons like Socrates or Moses or Buddha or Caesar or Alexander the Great. Some of them are quite good. There has never been one about the most famous and influential character in history. Why? Because the reality recounted by the four Gospel writers dwarfs the human imagination. We are ants, and we can only build anthills. Jesus is God, and his story is to our inventions as Mount Everest is to anthills. No one could ever have invented him. In fact, he invented us.



John the Baptist was the last of the prophets. Jesus says that he was the greatest of the prophets. Why did God send so many prophets before Christ? To prepare the way, the historical way, for Christ, to plant his roots in history. To show us that all of history, most especially Jewish history, was a providentially designed preparation. For no man in history ever fulfilled as many specific prophecies as Jesus did. To show that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the promised one, the meaning and fulfillment and culmination of history. To show that history is his-story.

The long preparation for Jesus' coming, culminating in John the Baptist, was like bulldozers clearing away hills and filling in valleys to prepare for the building of a road that we can travel on. In today's Gospel passage, Luke quotes Isaiah's prophecy word for word: "Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low." That leveling does not mean a Communist leveling of wealth by the removal of private property, or the removal of all inequalities in human life. It's not a political program. It means clearing away obstacles for a road, for a way, which is the road to heaven and the way of salvation, the way that is a person, Jesus Christ, who said, "I *am* the way." All other religious teachers said, "I teach the way; I teach the truth; I teach the meaning of life." Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6). Buddha said, "Come not to me, come to my dharma, my doctrine, my teaching." Jesus said, "Come unto me." Buddha said to his disciples, "You must be lamps unto yourselves." Jesus said, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12).

No other great religious founder ever rose from the dead, claimed to be the one true God, performed hundreds of miracles, or fulfilled as many prophecies as Jesus. There are at least three hundred specific prophecies in the Old Testament that Jesus literally fulfilled. The belief that all that happened by chance, by mere coincidence, not by divine design, is as ridiculous as the belief that the superintelligent design of the world's most complex computer,

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your supercomputer you call your brain, just happened to happen merely by chance, without divine design.

Oh, I forgot. There are people who believe that happened too. Surprisingly, many of them seem to be sane in other ways. Some of them even have PhDs. (A PhD is supposed to mean a “doctor of philosophy,” but sometimes it means a “doctor of phoniness.”) They are the ones who believe in the world’s biggest myth. They just myth the point. The point is Jesus.

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

FIRST READING

ZEPHANIAH 3:14-18A

Shout for joy, O daughter Zion!

Sing joyfully, O Israel!

Be glad and exult with all your heart,

O daughter Jerusalem!

The LORD has removed the judgment against you

he has turned away your enemies;

the King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst,

you have no further misfortune to fear.

On that day, it shall be said to Jerusalem:

Fear not, O Zion, be not discouraged!

The LORD, your God, is in your midst,

a mighty savior;

he will rejoice over you with gladness,

and renew you in his love,

he will sing joyfully because of you,

as one sings at festivals.

All seven of the promises in this passage are fulfilled in Christ. They are all “Good News,” or “Gospel.” It is such good news that Israel is exalted to “shout for joy” and to “sing joyfully” in the first verse; and in the last verse it says exactly the same thing about God, that “he will sing joyfully because of you.” Some joy is too good for prose, it requires poetry; too good for mere speech, it requires song. God too sings, did you know that? Or did you think he only gave sermons

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and speeches and commandments? God invented St. Francis. God invented Beethoven. God invented Pavarotti.

The first of the seven promises is that “the LORD has removed the judgment against you.” “Judgment” means justice. God has revoked our just punishment. St. Paul writes that “the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23). Wages are justice, gifts are mercy. The good news is that at the Last Judgment we will not get what we justly deserve. We will get what we don’t deserve. We will get mercy, and salvation; we will get God, and union with God in heaven—if we believe him, and trust him, and accept his gift, which is himself. God’s mercy is a free gift, free for the taking. The taking is faith. Almost the last verse in the Bible says: “Let the one who thirsts come forward, and the one who wants it receive the gift of life-giving water” (Rev. 22:17). God paid the price. The food is free. The only price is our hunger. Jesus says, “Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, / for they shall be satisfied” (Matt. 5:6).

The second promise mentioned is that “he has turned away your enemies.” Israel’s enemies were not the Babylonians or the Assyrians or the Egyptians or the Romans but their own sins. Sin destroys souls as cancer destroys cells. God’s angel announced that the Messiah should be called “Jesus,” which means “Savior,” because “he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). Not just from the punishment justly due to their sins—that was the first point—but also from their sins. He will make us holy. He will make us saints if we let him. In theological terms, the first promise was justification, the second promise is sanctification.

Third, “you have no further misfortune to fear.” That does not mean they would not have any more trials in this world. They would have many. But they were not to be feared. Jesus said to his disciples: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna” (Matt. 10:28). That’s the devil. Jesus gave the devil what Southerners call a “whuppin,” and he does not own us anymore.

By the way, there is a serious mistranslation here: the word in the Hebrew text is “evil,” not “misfortune.” Our Lord commands us to pray the words “Deliver us from evil,” not “Deliver us from misfortune,” because there are no such things as misfortunes. “Misfortune” means “bad fortune,” or “bad luck,” or “bad chance,” and there is no such thing as luck or chance in God’s world.

We are not promised that “we have nothing to fear but fear itself” (that’s really a silly saying). We have many little things to fear. But the big thing, hell and the devil, real evil—Jesus has conquered that. That’s what we believers have over unbelievers. An unbeliever, even if he enjoys many little things, fears the one big thing: death, and life after death. A Christian, even if he fears many little things, does not fear the one big thing. Christ conquered death as well as sin and punishment. Our three biggest enemies: sin and death and hell.

The fourth promise is that “the LORD, your God, is in your midst.” God is not just a heavenly puppeteer pulling our strings from a distance or a movie director sitting in a chair issuing orders. He is right here in our midst, present even in the midst of the worst evils in the world. We are not alone. We should never allow each other to feel alone. When someone you love is dying, the thing they need most is not anything you can give them, but yourself, your presence. God is with us: that is what the name “Emmanuel” means. Nothing could be better than that. God cannot give a greater gift than himself, his real presence. We have that in our souls, and we also have that in the Eucharist.

The fifth promise is that he will be “a mighty savior.” No force in all reality is mightier. The God who is all love and all wisdom is also all power. He’s got the whole world in his hands, and therefore he certainly has you in his hands.

The sixth promise is that “he will . . . renew you in his love.” What is this “renewal”? What are we destined to become? We don’t know. “‘What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, / and what has not entered the human heart, / what God has prepared for those who love him,’ / this God has revealed to us through the Spirit” (1 Cor. 2:9–10). But we do know this: that whatever this renewal is, whatever our new self is that God is going to make out of our old self, and whatever new world and life—“a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev.

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21:1)—he will make for us, it comes from his love and is motivated by his love. We can trust that love. In fact, there is nothing that is totally trustable except that.

The seventh promise is that “he will sing joyfully because of you.” We will be his song. Now, we sing about him; then, he will sing about us. If we now glorify him, he then will glorify us. The reason he has not shown us a picture of our new self, our heavenly self—the reason he has not told us what it looks like—is probably because if we saw it now, we would either not believe it—not believe that that beautiful creature is us—or else we would be strongly tempted to worship it.

Whatever it is that God has in store for us, it is always better, wiser, more loving, more joyful, more beautiful, and more worthy of song than we can imagine. The best description we have is this: we will be like Jesus.

SECOND READING

PHILIPPIANS 4:4–7

Brothers and sisters: Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

“Your kindness should be known to all”—the Greek word here translated “kindness” means unusual patience, or moderation, or forbearance, or graciousness, or sweet reasonableness. It is not the easy, generic kindness that we expect all decent people to have, but the heroic and self-sacrificial Christian virtue that is part of *agape* love. St. Paul says this “should be known to all” (literally, “all men should recognize it”) because it is not generic but specific—it distinguishes Christians. It is part of what Jesus meant when he said, “This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

The reason for St. Paul's rousing, joyful exhortation to "rejoice" is that "the Lord is near." Does he mean his present nearness or his Second Coming at the end of time? Both. For both are cause for rejoicing.

But how can we rejoice "always"? What about troubles and trials and pains and sufferings and failures? Here, too, "the Lord is near." And because we know that, even though we cannot simply "rejoice always," we can rejoice *in the Lord* always because the Lord is near always, even in our troubles and trials—especially there. Jesus said, in the Beatitudes, "Blessed are they who mourn, / for they will be comforted" (Matt. 5:4). Our sufferings can be blessings, if only we see the Lord's hand in them and accept them out of faith and trust in him and offer them up to him in surrender to his perfect will. All the saints say that. It's not easy, but it's possible, and it's blessed. Rejoicing does not mean feeling happy. We can't control our feelings. But we can control our choices, and we can choose to rejoice even in our sufferings, to accept them in faith, and to say yes to them even through our tears. And that is something very powerful and precious to God.

It's not as hard as we think. If we develop the habit of offering up our little daily sufferings in faith, hope, and love, we will find it easier to do that when the big ones come. If not, not.

When St. Paul tells us to "have no anxiety at all," he uses an active verb, not a passive verb, implying that this is something under our control. Anxiety is a feeling, and it is not in our power to have or not have feelings, but it is in our power to dismiss or to admit a feeling. That is a choice of our free will. We can dismiss a feeling from our minds because we can know that the Lord is our shepherd and therefore we get from him absolutely everything we really need even though we do not get everything we want. We can't choose not to feel awful, but we can choose to trust him even when we do.

God is all-powerful, all-good, and all-wise. We are not. Therefore, we don't understand how our present sufferings can be blessings in disguise, but we can believe it, and that faith gives us a peace that "surpasses all understanding." This peace does not come from us and from our understanding. It comes from

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God. It is God's own peace (see John 14:27). Our feelings may continue to be roiled like storm waves on the surface of our consciousness, but that peace can continue to be there as an anchor underneath all the turmoil.

Anxiety is a feeling. The peace that St. Paul speaks of here is more than a feeling. Our peace comes from our faith, and our faith is more than our understanding and our understanding is more than our feelings; therefore, our peace is more than a feeling.

We can believe much more than we understand, and we can understand much more than we feel. If we can understand that the feelings of pain from an operation are necessary because we have faith and trust in our doctor who is taking care of us, then we can certainly know the same thing when it is God, the divine physician, who is taking care of us.

Remember the parable of Fact, Faith, and Feeling, the three men who are walking on a high wall. As long as Faith keeps his eyes on Fact, on Truth, all three keep walking on the wall. But when Faith takes his eyes off of Fact and turns around to see about how Feeling is doing, both Feeling and Faith fall off the wall. But Fact never does. So let's keep our eyes peeled on divinely revealed Fact, on Truth, not on our own feelings. Feelings are good, and natural, and important, and precious, but they are not eyes, they do not see. Faith does.



One other remarkable point in our Scripture passage today is these words of St. Paul: "By prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God." The four basic forms of prayer are adoration, thanksgiving, confession, and petition—both for our own needs and for the needs of others. St. Paul tells us to unite two of these, to pray "in petition with thanksgiving" (i.e., gratitude).

Gratitude is essential. If we do not have gratitude, we simply cannot be religious, and we cannot be moral; in fact, we cannot even be human and civilized.

But how can petitions be "with gratitude"? Gratitude is giving thanks for the blessings and graces God has already given us in the past, while petition is

asking him for blessings and graces in the future. How can these two kinds of prayer be done at the same time? How can we combine petition with gratitude? How can petitions themselves be full of gratitude?

I think the answer is in our human experience, which is always the best analogy for our relationship with God. When we are grateful to our parents or our spouse or our close friends for the love they have given us, it is out of that relationship of gratitude and trust and love that we are bold to ask them for something we need. We would not ask a stranger because we don't have that personal knowledge and trust that we have with a friend or spouse or parent.

It is the very same relationship that prompts both thanksgiving and petition, both our gratitude for past favors and our boldness to ask and expect future favors. The point is not the favors, whether past or future, but the relationship. The relationship does not depend on the favors. It's not a calculating thing: "I remember you gave me A and B in the past, and therefore I think it is likely that you will give me C and D in the future. You are my machine: you did this for me when I pressed this button on you and that is why I am pressing the same button again." That's not friendship—that's technology.

Gratitude and petition are equally appropriate relations with persons, and equally inappropriate relations with machines. "Please" and "thank you" are two of the most important things we teach our children to say, and they express petition and thanksgiving. We don't say those two beautiful words to machines. And we must not let our relationships with machines creep into our relationships with persons.

Or with God. And we have a temptation to do that with God, to turn him into a kind of cosmic computer, hoping to change his mind when we press the right buttons on his keyboard. But the purpose of prayer, even petitionary prayer, is not to change God's mind but to change our own. We pray to fulfill God's will, not to change it. For God instituted prayer for that purpose: to give us the dignity of being active links in his providential chain. He often does not give us many of the good things that we need until we ask for them because he sees that what we need most of all is to ask, to pray, to have the two

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precious attitudes toward him that we teach our children to have toward us: the gratitude that prompts thanksgiving and the trust that prompts petition. In other words, “thank you” and “please.” They naturally go together. They are dimensions of the same relationship. You can’t really have either one without the other one.

We can also say “thank you” to God for the good things we trust he will give us as well as the good things he has already given us. We can thank him for his future love to us as well as for his past love to us, if we trust him, if we know him well enough to know that he always gives us what we truly need the most.

It’s not hard to see that that faith is justified and is based on reality: the reality that God’s love and power and wisdom are all unlimited. We don’t worship a God whose love for us is tiny, or even medium-sized, or even large, but a God whose love for us is infinite, infinitely greater than our love for each other. It’s not hard for us to believe that with our mind, but it’s hard to believe that with our lives, to apply that principle to every test of faith, every disappointment, suffering, failure, and problem that he allows to come into our lives. Most of our spiritual growing and maturing consists in learning to do that again and again, to pray the most essential of all petitions, “Thy will be done,” trusting that God’s will is the best will and God’s way is the best way. Because if that’s not true, then God is not God. If our way and our will and our plan are better than God’s, then we’re God and he’s not. And that’s insanity. Let’s not live in insanity. Let’s live in reality. That means: Let’s keep trusting and keep praying.

GOSPEL

LUKE 3:10-18 _____

The crowds asked John the Baptist, “What should we do?” He said to them in reply, “Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise.” Even tax collectors came to be baptized and they said to him, “Teacher, what should we do?” He answered them, “Stop

collecting more than what is prescribed.” Soldiers also asked him, “And what is it that we should do?” He told them, “Do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone, and be satisfied with your wages.”

Now the people were filled with expectation, and all were asking in their hearts whether John might be the Christ. John answered them all, saying, “I am baptizing you with water, but one mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” Exhorting them in many other ways, he preached good news to the people.

Students ask their teachers, “What should we think?” But the people asked John, “What should we do?” When Cicero, the great Roman orator, addressed the Senate, everyone said, “How beautifully he speaks!” But when Demosthenes, the great Greek orator, spoke, his soldiers leapt to their feet, clashed their swords on their shields, and said, “Let us march!” That is the difference between a philosopher and a prophet. John the Baptist was a prophet, and in the first words of our Gospel passage for today, they ask him not “What should we think?” but “What should we do?”

John the Baptist was the last and greatest of the prophets. The Jews refer to their whole Scriptures, which Christians call the Old Testament, and their whole tradition, as “the Law and the prophets.” Both the Law and the prophets came from God. Both told us what to do and what not to do.

So John the Baptist is very concrete and practical. He tells the man with two coats to give one of his coats to the man who has none. He tells the man with extra food to give some of it away to the man who is hungry. He tells the tax collectors, who were extorting more taxes from their people than the law required just to get rich themselves—which Roman law allowed and encouraged—to stop doing that injustice. He tells soldiers to stop using their power to bully and not

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to fight about their pay (Luke 3:10–14). It is not at all difficult for us to imagine exactly what John would say today to every profession. And to ourselves. It's common sense, common justice.

We know that's right because we all have a moral conscience, and we all admire the prophets' appeal to that conscience because we all know, by conscience, that what the prophets tell us to do is the right thing. Prophets and conscience always agree. The prophets are our outer conscience, and our conscience is our inner prophet. Conscience is the one prophet that God gives to every single human being who was ever born. When we listen to our conscience, we listen to a divine prophet.

Our conscience is not infallible. It needs to be educated. It needs to seek and find the truth. But that's much easier to do in the area of morality than in the area of theology.

Every religion in the world has both a theology and a morality. The theologies of the world are very different. They differ on whether there is a God or not (Buddhism says no); and if so, whether God is one or many (pagan polytheism says many); and if he is one, whether he is a person or a force (pantheism says he is a force, as in Star Wars); and if he is a person, whether he created the universe or not (pantheism says no, he *is* the universe); and if he created the universe, whether he takes care of it and performs miracles (deism says no; theism says yes); and if he is personal, whether he is three divine persons or only one (Judaism and Islam say he is only one; Christianity says he is three). Those are terribly big differences.

But the different religions don't differ much about morality. Every religion has something similar to the Ten Commandments. No religion approves blasphemy, lying, disrespect of parents and family, stealing, murdering, bullying, raping, cruelty, greed, injustice, arrogance, selfishness, hypocrisy, or adultery. They all approve justice and charity and humility and mercy and moderation and kindness and courage and honesty and respect. Even after the fall, God left a lot of knowledge of the moral law in the human conscience, even though he let the human mind wander far away in many directions from the truth of theology.

Why did he do that? I don't know for sure, but I think part of the reason is this. The human race grows and matures in stages very much like an individual. And it's easy to teach children what good and evil mean (though of course it's not easy to make them choose the good all the time), but it's not so easy to teach them what "God" means. Because the teachers themselves don't know much more than the basics. God is a great mystery, something as much greater than human beings as human beings are greater than ants. But morality is something human, something on our level, something we know very well. We know the difference between good and evil much more clearly than we know the difference between orthodoxy and heresy.

There's another reason too, I think. If you teach your kids about God but not about morality, they will know neither God nor morality; but if you teach them morality, they will know a lot about God. If you begin by teaching your children with a very clear morality, a Ten Commandments, at a very young age, and if they learn to love what is good and hate what is evil, if their will is good, then they are already implicitly loving God because they are loving what God is, loving the moral character of God. If you love holiness, goodness, justice, charity, and mercy, then even if you do not know who God is, you are at least loving what God is even if you do not yet know or love God; and then you stand a much better chance of finding out who God is. A great saint who is not a great theologian knows God more deeply, personally, and concretely than a great theologian who is not a great saint. You're closer to God if you're saintly, even if you have some wrong theological ideas, than if you're a selfish hypocrite, like the Pharisees, even if you have the right theology, as they did.

Both of these two things, the head and the heart, both the mind and the will, both truth and love, are very important, but the heart is the most important. And the prophets instruct the heart, the moral will, the conscience. That's how they prepare the way for Christ, and eventually for the surprising and shocking theology of Christ as the Son of God and the theology of the Trinity. That comes later.



John the Baptist is not the Messiah but only the prophet of the Messiah; the forerunner, the preparer. He is the set-up act, not the main event; the appetizer, not the meal; the bulldozer that levels the ground for the road, not the road. He points to Jesus and says, “He must increase; I must decrease” (John 3:30) and “I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals” (John 1:27). Why? Because John baptizes only with water, and that water, the water in John’s baptism, is only a symbol of moral cleaning up, an external expression of the inner repentance that he preaches. But the Messiah, the promised one, Jesus, will baptize also with fire, with the fire of the Holy Spirit—that is, with God himself. And the water of Jesus’ Baptism will be more than a symbol: it will actually give us the life of God, the Spirit of God. (In Hebrew as well as in Greek, the same word means both “life” and “spirit.”)

If anyone ever asks you what Jesus gave to the world that it didn’t have before, don’t answer “morality,” because the world already had that. God already gave the moral law, both through conscience and through “the Law and the prophets,” through Moses and the Ten Commandments and through a long line of prophets, culminating with John the Baptist. So what did Jesus give us that the Law and the prophets didn’t give us? The answer is very simple: he gave us God.

He brought God to earth and to our souls. Jesus baptized with fire while John baptized only with water. Jesus baptized us with the fire of the Holy Spirit in the water of Baptism. There’s supernatural fire in that natural water.

And we are given that fire, not to water it down or put it out, but to spread it, like a fire, like a good infection. That’s our task. Every Christian is a missionary. God gave us both natural, biological life and supernatural, spiritual life, to spread both, so we could “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28 RSV-CE). And he gave us the natural life for the sake of the supernatural life. We were born so that we could be “born again” with the very life of God in our souls

and spread it to everybody we come in contact with, like a good infection, by our deeds of love first of all and also by our words.

You can't be both alive and dead at the same time. You can't be both pregnant and not pregnant at the same time. You either have this fire, this life of God, in you, or you don't. You are either like wheat or like chaff, John says. When wheat is harvested, the living wheat is kept and the dead outside husk, the chaff, is thrown away because it's not alive and not edible. And at the Last Judgment, God will separate the living wheat from the dead chaff. That's the message of John the Baptist.

That sounds scary. That doesn't sound like the "good news," which is what "Gospel" means. But our Gospel reading for today says that that *is* the Gospel. Right after the passage repeats John's scary words that he will "gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire," it says, "Exhorting them in many other ways, he preached good news to the people." How is that good news? The answer is very simple: it's not good news to the chaff, but it's good news to the wheat.



Both fire and water can have opposite meanings. Fire can symbolize life or death. So can water. Jesus says he comes to give us "living water" (John 4:10, 7:38). But the waters of the Red Sea were waters of death to the Egyptians who drowned in them, and the waters of Noah's flood were waters of death to everyone who was not on the ark. So with fire. Fire can symbolize life, the life of God, as when John the Baptist says that he baptizes only with water but Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Or it can symbolize death, as when John speaks of the chaff burning with unquenchable fire.

The same water of the Red Sea was life to the Jews and death to the Egyptians. The same water of Noah's flood was life to those inside the ark and death to those outside of it. It's up to us to choose, life or death. In his last sermon

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to God's chosen people, Moses says to them, "I have set before you life and death. . . . Choose life" (Deut. 30:19).

What kind of life? We all already have biological life, natural life. We didn't choose that. We didn't choose to be born. But we have to choose supernatural life. Every time we choose good and reject evil, every time we choose love and reject selfishness, and every time we choose truth and reject falsehood and lies, we choose more life, spiritual life, supernatural life, more of a share in the life of God, in letting the Holy Spirit have his way in our souls and make our souls more and more pregnant with the very life of God.

That's why Christians are holy. We are like the Eucharist. Behind the appearances of a merely human life there truly lies hidden a divine life. If we know that, we will treat each other not as something secular but as something sacred, as pieces of precious jewelry. We will see the sign God put on us: "Handle with care."

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FIRST READING

MICAH 5:1-4A

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.

This messianic prophecy, like most prophecies, is by God's deliberate design not simple and clear, like a weather forecast. It's a clue, as in a detective story. It tests us. We have to actively interpret it. We understand it completely only when it is fulfilled. That's why we understand the Old Testament completely only through

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the New, through Christ. Christ lets us read Bible history backward, interpreting the old through the new, which makes the old much clearer.

Ten things are said about the Messiah here, ten clues. Jesus fulfills them all: (1) that he will come from the tiny little town of Bethlehem, (2) that he will rule Israel, (3) that his origin is from of old, (4) that God waits for his mother, (5) that his brethren will return to Israel, (6) that he shall stand firm, (7) that he shall shepherd his flock, (8) that they shall remain, (9) that his greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth, and (10) that he shall be peace.

Let's go through the ten, briefly. Actually, there are no less than three hundred prophecies of the Messiah in the Old Testament, and Jesus fulfills all of them. No one in history has ever fulfilled nearly so many prophecies, just as no one in history has ever performed nearly so many miracles, or risen from the dead, or claimed to be not just a wise man but God incarnate. Jesus is absolutely unique.

(1) First, why did he choose Bethlehem? Throughout history God works his greatest miracles through the poor and obscure people and places, not through the rich and the famous. Mary does the same: all her apparitions through the centuries are in out-of-the-way places and to poor people or children. Why? One reason is because God sees that we need to learn humility. And God can work with the humble, who trust him; he can't work with the proud, who won't. Another reason is that we need to learn to respect the poor and the obscure—not just to patronize them and pity them but respect them. Another reason is that we need to question our priorities and not expect so much from visible human greatness. Jesus could have been born in Rome, become emperor, and ruled the world. He did the opposite. He was born in a flyover state; he lived as an obscure carpenter for thirty years and was crucified as a criminal. Like water, God goes to the lowest places.

(2) Second, what does the prophecy mean that the Messiah will rule Israel? Most Jews thought it meant that he would be a great king, like Solomon, and a great

political and military conqueror. But the true Israel that Jesus will rule, the true “chosen people of God,” is not a political or military or economic entity. Jesus’ seat is not in the halls of Congress but in the halls of our hearts. It is not a rule of power but of love. Our hearts are his thrones.

(3) Third, what does it mean that his origin is from of old? Not merely that he is the son of David from a thousand years of Jewish ancestry, but that he is the Son of God from eternity. He was there “in the beginning” (John 1:1). He is the divine Word through whom God created the universe. God’s Word is not a set of letters; it is a person. His human name is Jesus. His divine name is God the Son, the eternal Son of God the Father. Even if Adam was still alive on earth today, Jesus would be older than Adam. He is also younger than all the babies who will ever be born.

(4) Fourth, there is a Marian prophecy here too: God will wait for “she who is to give birth.” God could have just dropped his Son down from heaven as an adult, as a sort of opposite mirror image of the Ascension; but instead, he chose to begin as a zygote, then an embryo, then a fetus, then a baby, then a boy, then a teenager, and then a young man, to sanctify every stage of human life. (Even the life of a teenager! Teenagers can be like Jesus because Jesus was a teenager.) At the Annunciation, God’s angel waited for Mary’s permission before the Holy Spirit miraculously overshadowed Mary and she conceived in her womb her own Creator. That was all part of God’s plan from the beginning. Jesus is the only person in history who chose his own mother.

(5) Fifth, what does the prophecy mean when it says that “his kindred shall return / to the children of Israel”? When Micah gave this prophecy, he must have understood it to mean that the Jews would literally return to the Promised Land from exile, and this actually did happen. But it was also a symbol of something greater: the spiritual return that Jesus came to give to all of us: the return of our souls to God, our spiritual home. And when the passage calls us

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his “kindred,” it also prophesies that Jesus will remake us into God’s children and Jesus’ brothers. In the early Church, Christians were allowed to call God “Father” and pray the “Our Father” only after they became Christians by Baptism. It was not just a new name but a new nature, a real change in their very being. They were now part of God’s family, adopted sons and daughters of God, as Jesus is the eternal Son of God.

(6) Sixth, the prophecy that says “he shall stand firm” probably signifies Jesus’ Resurrection. The word used in the Apostles’ Creed for the “resurrection of the body” is *anastasis*, which means, literally, “standing up.” It’s something dead bodies can’t do.

(7) And the seventh prophecy, that “he shall . . . shepherd his flock,” means that Jesus will be to us what a good shepherd is to his sheep: their savior, protector, and benevolent owner, and eventually himself a sheep, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world by being slaughtered, like the Passover lamb. He would be the real meaning of all the thousands of sheep that were sacrificed in the temple ritual from the time God gave to Moses his elaborate instructions about the liturgy of sacrifice right up to the time when this symbolism was fulfilled and revealed and understood in Christ.

(8) And when the eighth prophecy says “they shall remain,” the “they” here means us, his sheep, his people, his kindred; and the “remain” here probably means immortality. We “remain” alive even through death because Christ did. Our hope of resurrection rests on Christ’s Resurrection and our being “in” him.

(9) The ninth prophecy, which says, “His greatness / shall reach to the ends of the earth,” means that Christ will be made known to every place in the world. In the beginning, there were only a few disciples, then three thousand more at Pentecost, and today there are over two billion Christians in the world. What began in Jerusalem spread to Judea, to the rest of Israel, to the Near East and

west to Europe, and then to the rest of the world. The fact that Europe is no longer a Christian continent is tragic but not devastating. Unlike most other religions, Christianity is not local but universal. Islam is mostly confined to Muslim countries, Buddhism to Buddhist countries, Confucianism to China, and Hinduism to India, but Christianity is worldwide. Today it is just as much an African religion as it is an American religion. Christianity is not a political or national system. Sorry to disappoint you, but Jesus isn't running for president.

(10) Finally, the prophecy says that "he shall be peace." Notice that it does not say merely that he will teach peace, or even that he will make peace, but that he will *be* peace. He gives us only one gift: himself. In that one gift is all gifts. That's why St. Paul writes that Jesus is our righteousness, our justification, and our redemption, not just that he gives these gifts. God is not like Santa Claus. Santa Claus gives a whole sack of gifts, but he does not give himself. He doesn't live with us; he just drops off presents once a year.

When I was a little kid, I desperately wanted an expensive toy train for Christmas. My father sat me down and asked me, "Do you know why we give each other gifts at Christmas?" I said, "Because God gave us Jesus at the first Christmas, right?" He was pleased. "Right! And why did God do that?" "Because he loves us, right?" "Right again! Good for you, son. You understand the meaning of Christmas very well. Now if I don't have enough money to buy you that expensive toy train you want, you still know I love you with all my heart, don't you?" I thought quickly. This was a trick I didn't expect. Could I hold him hostage until he gave me the toy? Could I lie and say no so that I'd make him buy me the train? No, he was smarter than I was. I couldn't fool him. I had to tell the truth. So I said, "Yes, Dad, I know you love me no matter what." "Good for you, son. You're right again." I thought: "Darn it, I just gave him an excuse not to buy me that toy." When Christmas came, I got the toy. But I got something better: I got a lesson about love. The toy train is rusting away in my attic, but the lesson is not rusting away; it's very much alive in my life.

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When we give each other Christmas presents, as we will do as soon as Advent turns into Christmas, the point is love: love is the gift of yourself. In marriage, that gift of self is total, exclusive, forever, and unconditional. (If you don't understand or believe that, please don't get married until you do.)

SECOND READING

HEBREWS 10:5-10

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.

We are near the end of Advent and the beginning of Christmas. The whole two-thousand-year-long preparation of God's chosen people in the Old Testament, or the Old Covenant, is the historical Advent that we celebrate liturgically in our Advent season; and those two thousand years were the world's preparation for the coming of the Messiah, as our one-month Advent season is our preparation for the Christmas season of the liturgical year. This short passage from the Letter to the Hebrews shows us the essential contrast between the two covenants, or testaments, the old and the new.

We speak of the Old Testament and the New Testament as two Scriptures,

two collections of books. A “testament” is a covenant in written form. So what is a “covenant”?

A covenant is a new relationship between persons that is entered into freely, is made by a promise, and is based on trust or faith or fidelity in keeping the promise. Without this trust, no human relationship can endure, whether friendships, families, businesses, states, laws, or treaties. That’s why, in primitive societies, one who is unfaithful to covenant promises is seen to be the most dangerous person in the world: because he is undoing the single most fundamental social bond between persons and thus attacking all of human society at its root.

The most complete and most important human covenant is marriage. That’s why marriage is frequently used in Scripture as a symbol, on the human or horizontal level, of the “vertical” covenant between God and man. That’s also why every stable society in history has had stable marriages. Ask yourself: What does that fact say about the health and future of our society?

A covenant may be either between man and man or between God and man. The Old and New Covenants in the Bible are between God and man.

What is the essential difference between the Old Covenant and the New, between Moses and Christ, between Old Testament Judaism and New Testament Christianity? It’s the same God who instituted both, and his moral law has not changed. Jesus did not preach any new morality. In fact, even all the radical statements in his famous Sermon on the Mount can be found in the Jewish rabbinic tradition. But the essence of the Old Covenant was the sacrifice of animals, especially lambs, and also vegetables, especially grain, in the temple as a symbolic sin offering. They could not take away sin, but that which they symbolized—namely, Jesus’ sacrifice of himself on the cross—did take away sin. He was the Lamb of God who actually takes away the sins of the world. That’s the point of today’s passage from Hebrews.

What motivated Jesus to do that? Obedience to the will of his Father. For Jesus, the phrase “I come to do your will” meant not merely obeying the commandments but above all doing the thing he came to earth to do: to establish

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the New Covenant by dying for us, to take away our sins, to undo the divorce between God and man.

Jesus comes to do God's will. "Thy will be done" is the most essential prayer. It transforms our whole life. It takes our hands off the steering wheel of our lives and puts God's hands on. It gets off the throne and lets God get on.

And the essential thing God wills for us is to be like Christ, to give up our lives for others. For most of us, this will not involve physical martyrdom, but for all of us, it will involve the spiritual martyrdom of the sacrifice of self-will, of egotism, of the "my will be done" that is our spiritual programming, our spiritual heredity, our spiritual genetic code that we are born with. That's what theologians call "original sin."

The will is a power of the soul, not of the body. Yet it was not only in his will but in his body that Christ suffered and died for us. Scripture says, "By this [spiritual] 'will,' we have been consecrated [that is, saved, made holy] through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ" (Heb. 10:10). Christ did not save us by only giving us his mind, his teachings; he saved us by giving us his body in his Passion and death on the cross. In the first half of the Mass, we hear the mind of Christ, the divinely inspired Word of God on paper. In the last half of the Mass, we offer the Body of Christ, the Word of God on wood, the wood of the cross. That is the sacrifice that saves us.

The temple sacrifices of the Old Covenant were also concrete, bodily, and bloody, not just abstract spiritual teachings or readings from a book—because they symbolized the concrete, bodily, bloody sacrifice on the cross. That's why we have crucifixes on our walls instead of Bibles. The crucifix does not point to the Bible—the Bible points to the crucifix.

We receive the mind of Christ in the first half of the Mass in the inspired Scripture readings. We receive the Body of Christ in the second half of the Mass in Holy Communion. Friends share their minds with each other; parents and spouses, in different ways, give their bodies as well.

God wants to be our friend, so he shares his mind with us in divine revelation, and we share our minds with him in prayer.

God also wants to be our Father, so he gives us life. He creates each of us individually—he creates our soul when our parents procreate our bodies—and he also re-creates us in Baptism, when he gives us a share in his supernatural life.

God wants even more: he wants to marry us. The last event in human history is the marriage between the Lamb and his Bride, his Church—us (see Rev. 21–22). That spiritual marriage is consummated in heaven, but it begins here on earth.

Why would God want that? Why would he do that? And why would he pay such a price, on the cross, to do that? It seems crazy.

Because God is love. And love is crazy. “Crazy”! Whether she knew it or not, Patsy Cline’s classic song is really about God.

GOSPEL

LUKE 1:39–45 _____

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.”

Today’s Gospel is one of the joyful mysteries of the Rosary—the Visitation. The Visitation produced one of the most joyful songs ever sung: Mary’s “Magnificat.” We don’t have the music—it was probably chanted—but we have the words. A lot of them. There are more words from Mary’s lips in this one song than all the other words put together that Mary says in all four Gospels. But we don’t have the “Magnificat” in today’s Gospel passage. Instead, we have part

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of the most often-repeated prayer in the world—the “Hail Mary.” The Hail Mary begins with the angel’s salutation to Mary at the Annunciation: “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you,” and then adds Elizabeth’s words: “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” Protestants shouldn’t be suspicious of this prayer: these words are straight from the Bible. How can it be wrong to repeat what the Bible says God’s angel said and what Elizabeth said?

Here’s a quiz question for you: Who was Jesus’ youngest disciple? The answer is John the Baptist, who recognized the Lord from the womb, before either he or Jesus was even born.

Here’s another Bible quiz question for you: Who was the first person to confess the first Christian creed? Here’s the answer. The first Christian creed, repeated in two passages in St. Paul’s letters, is the three-word formula “Jesus is Lord” (Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3). Christians never called Caesar, or any other human being, “Lord.” The term “Lord” (*kyrios* in Greek) is reserved for God alone. This is the first creed because this is the first and most distinctive article of faith for a Christian: that Jesus is the Lord, Jesus is divine, Jesus is God incarnate. Now who is the first to confess him as Lord? And the answer is: Elizabeth. She said to Mary, who brought the unborn Jesus to Elizabeth, “How does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” Elizabeth is the first to call Jesus “my Lord.” If a Christian is one who confesses that “Jesus is Lord,” that makes Elizabeth the first Christian. Her saying is also the biblical basis for calling Mary “the Mother of God.” For that is exactly what Elizabeth said she was.

Here’s another Bible quiz question: How did Elizabeth know that Mary’s baby was the Lord, that he was divine? How could God be a baby in a woman’s womb? How could a baby in a woman’s womb be God? That’s a stretch that is almost impossible to make, especially for a Jew, who knows better than any of the polytheistic pagans who made up the rest of the world how unique and transcendent and perfect this one and only God is. How come Elizabeth was the first Christian theologian? How did she figure out

the theology of the Incarnation? The text gives you the answer: She didn't figure it out. She was told. By whom? By God. Elizabeth was "filled with the Holy Spirit."

Here's another question: Why did Elizabeth say "Blessed are you among women"? Mary was the most blessed merely human being who ever lived, whether male or female; she was the only one whom God blessed by miraculously having her be conceived in her mother Anna's womb without original sin. That's the meaning of the Immaculate Conception. But Elizabeth could have said, "Blessed are you among all the human beings of either sex who have ever lived." Why confine the class to women? And the answer is obvious: she is blessed as a woman—her womanhood is blessed—because she is the Mother of God. No male is the father of God, but this female is the Mother of God! Men can do many of the things women can do and women can do many of the things men can do, but the one thing no man can ever do is to be a mother. Only a woman can be a mother. That is already a high privilege that all women have over all men. And now God has added another privilege to Mary: added to human motherhood is divine motherhood. Among this privileged class of human beings, Mary is the most privileged. This is the most radical feminism ever imagined, the highest exaltation of womanhood in the history of human thought.

One more question: How did John the Baptist recognize Jesus from inside Elizabeth's womb even before either he or Jesus was born? Is that possible? Well, it's possible for an unborn baby to recognize sounds and to respond to them, especially to classical music. There's some scientific evidence that babies who are used to hearing classical music before they're born are calmer and happier than babies who aren't. So if a baby can recognize and respond to Mozart, all the more should he be able to recognize and respond to the one who invented and inspired Mozart, to the Word of God, to Jesus, to God incarnate.

Our science is teaching us that there's much more going on everywhere in the universe than we thought before; that, as Hamlet put it to Horatio, "there

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are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” And two examples of that here are what’s going on in these two women’s wombs.

John the Baptist couldn’t hear Jesus, because Jesus wasn’t able to make any sounds from the womb. Unborn babies can hear, but they can’t speak. But look again at the text: “When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the infant leaped in her womb.” It was Mary’s voice that John heard. That was the music that was sweeter than Mozart. And then it went on to sing the “Magnificat.” John heard that music.

You see, Mary was doing the same thing that John the Baptist would do once he was born: preparing the way for Jesus, pointing to Jesus, preaching Jesus, disappearing into Jesus, stepping back and letting him appear. The greatest of all prophets (that’s what Jesus called John the Baptist) and the greatest of all women (that’s what God’s angel called Mary) both do the same thing: “He must increase; I must decrease,” as John put it (John 3:30). It’s their humility that makes them great. That’s the central theme of the “Magnificat”: that God exalts the humble and humbles the exalted.

That’s what Mary is doing all the time, and what she is doing now from heaven. She loves nothing more than to answer our petition in the *Salve Regina*: “Show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus.” Protestants miss that point: that Mary’s role in our lives is exactly the opposite of what they fear it is, a rival to Jesus, an obstacle to our total worship of Jesus, an idol. Her whole life and her whole love is to do nothing but point to him. She is the super-saint—not to be put on a pedestal far away in the rarefied air but to be imitated in our lives here on the ground. She is what we are all designed to be. Insofar as Protestants are Christ-centered, Mary is the perfect model for Protestants too.

