

*The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
Feast of*

The Holy Name

January 1

RCL

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Psalm 148:1-14

Luke 2:22-40

The Collect



Eternal Father, you gave to your incarnate Son the holy name of Jesus to be the sign of our salvation: Plant in every heart, we pray, the love of him who is the Savior of the world, our Lord Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.
For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,
until her vindication shines out like the dawn,
and her salvation like a burning torch.
The nations shall see your vindication,
and all the kings your glory;
and you shall be called by a new name
that the mouth of the Lord will give.
You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord,
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

Psalm 148:1-14

- 1 Praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord from the heavens;
praise him in the heights!
- 2 Praise him, all his angels;
praise him, all his host!
- 3 Praise him, sun and moon;
praise him, all you shining stars!
- 4 Praise him, you highest heavens,
and you waters above the heavens!
- 5 Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for he commanded and they were created.
- 6 He established them forever and ever;
he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.
- 7 Praise the Lord from the earth,
you sea monsters and all deeps,
- 8 fire and hail, snow and frost,
stormy wind fulfilling his command!
- 9 Mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars!
- 10 Wild animals and all cattle,
creeping things and flying birds!
- 11 Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!
- 12 Young men and women alike,
old and young together!
- 13 Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for his name alone is exalted;
his glory is above earth and heaven.
- 14 He has raised up a horn for his people,
praise for all his faithful,
for the people of Israel who are close to him.
Praise the Lord!

Luke 2:22-40

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,

 according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
 which you have prepared in the presence of all

peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”

And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed — and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

SERMON

Just before Christmas, I saw a display of carolers cut from plywood and painted in Edwardian dress. They were in good voice, each face up-tilted, each mouth caught mid-syllable. For some reason I thought of these plywood figures spending most of the year in the back of the garage, their faces still uplifted in hope, their mouths still open in silent song, heard by none, ignored by all until the Christmas season again rolled around. Then they would be retrieved from behind the bicycles and the lawn mower, given a quick rub-down with soap and water to remove the accumulated detritus of the year, and posted again in their accustomed place.

Little Mary had no such luxury. For her, Christmas was not a season to be repeated each year. It was a responsibility every day of the year. Her son had to be fed, and clothed, and he must have a place to rest his head

where he would be safe. For Mary, Christmas ushered in her life as a mother, a role she fulfilled with some enthusiasm, for Mark tells us, recounting a later event in Jesus' life:

Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?'

The Catholic Church teaches as a foundational understanding of the faith, the perpetual virginity of Mary. These children, the church reasons, must therefore be children of Joseph's first marriage to some other, unnamed, Mrs. Joseph. This is why Joseph is always pictured as an older man. It really makes no difference if these children were of her body or not. She is the mama, and it's her responsibility to care for them, not just at Christmas time, but all year long.

Here, in a nutshell, is the balancing act that we must

accomplish in our faith. We must treat Christmas and the coming of our Lord with the celebration that it deserves without losing sight of what a commonplace event it really was – the birth of a child under less than ideal circumstances, to a little girl, far from home.

Luke and Matthew, the two Gospels which contain infancy narratives, are at great pains to convince us, and their first century readers, of the magnitude of this event. Stars move. Wise and important men from hundreds of miles to the east journey to tiny Bethlehem. Angels appear to shepherds. Even Herod the Horrible is aware that the foundations of common life have been shaken by an event so powerful that even the heavens are moved, but the actual physical phenomenon – the initiating event – is a thing of such commonality as to be all but unnoticeable. It was the birth of a child under less than ideal circumstances, to a little girl, far from

home.

I think we could be forgiven for taking from the Gospel stories only the magnificence of the event, and overlooking the ordinariness of it, but there is a danger there. We might be misled into believing that God must always act with pomp and ceremony. This is the wrong lesson to take from the the story of the nativity of our Lord. God works in inconsequential events. God acts in the commonplace.

Kentucky nurtured a real, gosh-for-shooting holy man in the person of Thomas Merton. For a man of the stature of Merton, you would expect a stars-moving, heaven shaking sort of a beginning of his awareness of God. Merton's epiphany was nothing like that. He wrote of it in "Conjectures of A Guilty Bystander". I cannot possibly explain it with more clarity than did Merton:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Wal-

nut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. ...

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed...I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other. But this cannot be seen, only believed and "understood" by a peculiar gift.

I have always thought that Merton's choice of the word "overwhelmed" was a happy one. He wasn't "suddenly aware", he didn't "notice", it wasn't a conclusion reached while preparing something for a talk. He was

overwhelmed. Sometimes, we're so confident of how thoroughly competent we feel that we forget what it means to be overwhelmed, to be stopped in our tracks, to have the divine roll or surge over us with such force and clarity that it is impossible to ignore. Such was Thomas Merton's experience in Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district. Such was also the experience of little Mary.

A picture is worth a thousand words. We take as our internal representation of the nativity story the picture from the nativity set on top of the TV. As lovely as the nativity is, it's a Hallmark Cards version. It's much too tidy, and it scribbles over all the human parts. Mary is as overwhelmed as Merton was, and she didn't even have to go to Louisville.

Two weeks ago, we read of the visit of Gabriel to Mary predicting the birth of Jesus.

And he came to her and said, ‘Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.’ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

Perplexed or not, Mary signed on to carry the child, saying, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Last week, Luke told us of the visit of the shepherds and again, Mary had perplexing things to ponder

When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

This week, forty days after the birth of Jesus, Joseph and Mary, she only a month post-natal, go from Nazareth to Jerusalem, a distance about the same as from here to Morehead, on foot. With a baby.

Mary and Joseph took upon themselves the burden

and responsibility to do for Jesus what we celebrate only once a year and they did it in the real world, with real journeys and real sacrifices. That which we celebrate during Advent and the Twelve Days of Christmas, they undertook for the childhood of this most strange and holy child. For that time, they, and the child, were as invisible to the world as the plywood carolers behind the lawn mower in the back of the garage, heard by none, ignored by all until Epiphany, when the world came to know of Him.

We live in a commonplace world, filled with commonplace events. We are called to act where we are, to keep in our vision the holiness of this commonplace world and to share that vision with our fellows, for God Himself became a member of the human race.

Again, Thomas Merton says it better than I can:

It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the

human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes many terrible mistakes: yet, with all that, God Himself gloried in becoming a member of the human race. A member of the human race! To think that such a commonplace realization should suddenly seem like news that one holds the winning ticket in a cosmic sweepstake.

I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now that I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.

It is a reality that each of us must face that not everyone is conscious that they belong to God. To many, that is a closed book. Some few get to peek outside and become conscious that we all, each of us, belong to God. This does not make us better or superior beings or

anything of the sort. It means that in addition to doing that which everyone else does, we have the additional duty to carry the child, the son of God, into the world.

At Jerusalem, when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, they were met by two people: Simeon and Anna. From these two seers, Mary and Joseph again were reminded of the divine within the commonplace, and they were amazed at what was being said about him. I'm not surprised. It is a shock when the divine meets us here, where we are. It's disorienting, just as Merton said.

Disorienting or not, the commonplace of life is where we meet God and realize that He was here, with us, all along. God's creation is the common place where both the secular and the holy commune. Here is where we live, and here is where God came to meet us in the form of a baby. Here, in the common place God has

chosen for us, we meet Him and receive from Him His teaching which we are to spread to all we meet. That is your job, church. It is your job to see to it that the good news of Christmas isn't hidden behind the lawn mower, heard by none, ignored by all. You are to bring the certainty that within the commonplace events of human lives is the holy. Bring LIFE church, LIFE into God's creation. Be for all a reminder that God acts within the commonplace.

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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