

Well, that sure went by fast, didn't it. The holiday season, all that preparation and cooking and present wrapping and eating and eating and eating and Santa Claus and finally the ball coming down in Times Square on New Year's Eve, has come and gone. It's time to trudge on back to school this week. Except, in church we are still singing Christmas carols, because for the Church, it is still the season of Christmas. For Catholics the Christmas season includes, obviously, the feast of Christmas (and its vigil on Christmas Eve), the feast of the Holy Family (when Christmas is not on a Sunday), today's feast of Mary, the Mother of God (which occurs on New Year's Day), the feast of Epiphany (which was the original Christmas Day), and finally the Baptism of Christ, after which Ordinary Time returns. So as Catholics, we continue to celebrate the special season of Christmas, remembering when God became part of the human race.

Today's feast of Mary, the Mother of God, gets its origin liturgically back on March 25th, the feast of the Annunciation, which is nine calendar months before December 25th, to echo the nine "months" it takes a baby to develop in its mother's womb. The Church defines the day when the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would be the mother of God's son as the day the Baby Jesus started to develop in Mary's womb. On that day, Mary said to Gabriel, "Let it be done according to your word," and God's will. In other words, by agreeing to what the angel announced, not only did Mary agree to become the mother of God, but she also agreed to let God's will be done (as Jesus taught us to pray in the Lord's Prayer). Mary felt a sense of peace when she surrendered to God's will. That sense of peace Mary felt brings us to today's first reading.

A reading from the book of Numbers (**Numb 6:22-27**)

The Lord told Moses to tell Aaron and his sons what they must say to bless the people of Israel. ¶ It was: "I pray that the Lord will bless and protect you. May the Lord show kindness and

mercy to you. May He be good to you and give you peace. ¶
Then the Lord said, “If they speak in My name to the people of
Israel, I will bless them.” ¶ The Word of the Lord.

This prayer from the book of Numbers (Numb 6:24-26) goes all the way back to the time of Moses, about 3,300 years ago. It comes from the Hebrew Torah (called the Pentateuch), which is the holiest part of Hebrew scripture and the beginning five books of the Christian Old Testament. This prayer is a poem in its original Hebrew and as such is considered to be one of the oldest poems from the Bible. It asks for God’s blessings, protection, kindness, and mercy. In order to accept these gifts from God, we, like Mary, have to give in to Him, what He wants us to do, and trust that if His will is done, all will go well, maybe not according to our plans, but certainly according to His. Mary did that when she said yes to Gabriel, even before her Son ever had a chance to teach anyone His prayer that God’s will should be done on earth as it is in heaven. Because she was able to say yes to God, she was at peace with Him, which is what is the final part of the prayer Moses was to teach Aaron.

Now let’s turn our attention to our Psalm for today, Psalm 67.

Responsorial Psalm (**Psalm 67:1-2, 5 and 7**)

May God bless us in His mercy.

May God bless us in His mercy.

Our God, be kind and bless us! Be pleased and smile. Then everyone on earth will learn to follow You, and all nations will see Your power to save us.

May God bless us in His mercy.

Make everyone praise You and shout Your praises. Pray for His blessings to continue and for everyone on earth to worship our God.

May God bless us in His mercy.

Many parts of Psalm 67 are not so much different from the prayer in the first reading from the book of Numbers. May God be kind and bless us in His mercy, and show everyone on earth so that they may know to worship Him. Mary was blessed by God in a most special way. And through Mary's blessing, we can come to see how God blesses all people.

Now let's turn our attention to the second reading:

A reading from the letter of St. Paul to the Galatians (**Gal 4:4-7**)

At the time chosen by God, He sent His Son, born of a woman under the law, to save those who were restricted by the law, so that we may become the adopted children of God. And as proof that you are children of God, He sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying out, "Abba!" which means, "Father!" So you are no longer a slave to the law and to sin but a child of God, which means you are also an heir, through God. ¶ The word of the Lord.

St. Paul tells us about how the birth of Jesus rescued us from blind observance of the laws which governed everyone's behavior. Now, because of Jesus, we are all children of God, members of God's family, and heirs to His blessings and love. And wasn't Mary the first one to experience that closeness to God through the birth of her Son?

Now it's time for the gospel, after the gospel acclamation.

Alleluia, Alleluia. Alleluia, Alleluia.

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets.
Now God speaks to us through the Son.

Alleluia, Alleluia.

+ A reading from the holy gospel according to St. Luke (**Luke 2:16-21**).

The shepherds hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and they saw the baby lying in the manger. ¶ When the shepherds saw Jesus, they told His parents what the angel had said about Him. Everyone listened and was surprised. But Mary kept thinking about all this and wondering what it all meant. ¶ As the shepherds returned to their sheep, they were praising God and saying wonderful things about Him. Everything they had seen and heard was just as the angel had said. ¶ Eight days later, Jesus' parents did for Him what the law of Moses commands. And they named Him Jesus, just as the angel had told Mary when he promised that she would have a baby. ¶ The gospel of the Lord.

Today's gospel reading is a continuation of St. Luke's Christmas story about the birth of Jesus, right after the angels are singing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to everyone who pleases God." (See why the Church Christmas season continues?) So these poor and lowly shepherds (God always tends to the poor and lowly) spoke with angels and watched and listened as they were singing in the sky. Imagine them looking at each other. "Did we just see what we think we just saw? Yeah, right." Then they might have said to each other something like, "We may as well do as the *angels* (?) said and go and see if we can find this couple and their baby in a...*in a manger* (!?!)." And wouldn't you know, the angels were right!

Now you might also think that Mary and Joseph must have looked at each other and wondered what all these shepherds (Wait, what?

Shepherds?!?) were doing visiting them in a stable in Bethlehem, of all places. Then the shepherds might have told them something like, “You’re probably not going to believe this, but we’re here because these *angels* told us to come and see your baby.” The shepherds might have been afraid that these new parents would throw stuff at them and tell them to get lost. But Mary just sat there and thought, “Wow!” taking it all in and wondering what it all meant. This was Mary’s second close encounter with angels in less than a year, so she knew that the shepherds’ story wasn’t as preposterous as it first sounded. She was coming to understand that God’s plan could be as fantastic as she and the shepherds were experiencing.

So in Numbers we are exposed to the ancient Hebrew blessing, which is largely repeated in Psalm 67, promising the Lord’s peace if we just give in to Him and His plan like Mary did. Then St. Paul tells us that with Jesus’ birth, we are all God’s children, members of God’s family, and entitled to all of His wonderful blessings, just like Mary was blessed as the mother of His Son. And when she finally became that mother, she simply marveled at all of God’s glorious blessings. Following the example of Mary, the Mother of God, we too need to ponder God’s ways and appreciate His many blessings.

And that, girls and boys, is the lesson in today’s readings. Speak about it with your parents.

Mary, Mother of God, 2023
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