

4 SUNDAY ADVENT (DEC 21st SUNDAY)

HOMILY ON LUKE 1: 26-38 (L/14)

Introduction: Today's readings focus on the circumstances leading up to the first coming of Jesus, the event which sets the pattern for his coming to us now and at the end of time. The Gospel stresses the key role of Mary in the work of our salvation. In addition, today's Scripture texts describe God's promise to David and its fulfillment in Jesus, the Son of David. They also tell us that God's preparation for the coming of Jesus was full of surprises.

Scripture lessons: The first reading surprises us by telling of God's promise to David that he would have a long line of royal descendants culminating with a final king, Jesus Christ. In the Responsorial Psalm, the Psalmist recalls all of God's promises and surprises us by describing God's promise to David and his descendants in terms of a Covenant. Today's Gospel surprises us by telling us that this King would be born to an ordinary virgin, not by means of sexual relationship, but through the Holy Spirit, and that Jesus would become a descendant of David. This would occur through Joseph, Mary's betrothed husband and the legal father of her son, as Joseph was "of the house of David." The Gospel narrative surprises us also by reminding us that God's promise is best fulfilled not in buildings, or even great kings like Solomon, but rather in humble souls like Mary who trusted in God's promise. The second reading also surprises us with Paul's explanation of the unveiling of God's plan for human salvation through Jesus. Thus, the unfolding of God's plan of salvation through history has contained many surprises.

Life messages: 1) We need to say a courageous and generous "yes" to God: True obedience comes from a free choice made in the light of what is true and good. It often requires a great deal of courage because it can involve going against the tide of social expectations. True obedience also aims at putting oneself at the service of something/Someone that is greater than oneself by accepting what God clearly wants us to do or what He wants to do through us. It is by saying, with Jesus and Mary, a wholehearted and totally unconditional "Yes" to Jesus that he will be re-born in me or maybe even born in me for the first time. By my saying "Yes," Jesus will be born or re-born in others too. 2) We need to try to learn God's plan for our lives: The Good News in today's Scripture message is not only that God is making provision for the salvation of His people, but also that He has a plan for each individual person. In many cases, our work for God seems rather ordinary, but each ordinary task which we carry out fits into God's plan in ways that we cannot yet understand. God desires not the skill of our hands but the love of our hearts. The Babe in the Manger reminds us of what God has done and is still doing for us. What are we doing in return? Let us

show our gratitude to God by living as true followers of Christ: "Behold here I am Lord to do thy will."



ADVENT IV (Dec 21) II SAM 7:1-5, 8-12, 14-16; ROM 16: 25-27; Lk 1: 26-38

Anecdote 1) : The FBI and the White House staff: The FBI agents conducted a raid in a psychiatric hospital in Santiago that was under investigation for medical insurance fraud. After hours of reviewing thousands of medical records, the dozens of agents were terribly hungry. The chief in charge of the investigation called a nearby pizza parlor with delivery service to order a quick dinner for his colleagues. Here is the recorded text of the conversation. **Agent:** Hello. I would like to order 19 large pizzas and 67 cans of soda. **Pizza Man:** And where would you like them delivered? **Agent:** We're over at the psychiatric hospital, and we are all FBI agents, and since we have locked the front door to help our operations, you will have to go around to the back to the service entrance to deliver the pizzas. **Pizza Man:** A group of FBI agents calling from the psychiatric hospital that I should come with 19 large pizzas and 67 cans of sodas through the back door? **Agent:** That's right, and it is very urgent. We've been here all day and we're starving. I have my F.B.I. checkbook right here. Will you show up soon? **Pizza Man:** I don't think so. **Agent:** Why? **Pizza Man:** Because last week it was President Obama who ordered pizzas from that psychiatric hospital for his White House staff! I shall ask your doctors to give you stronger medicines to ward off your F.B.I. hallucinations and to help you sleep well. Bye." Click. Bzzz. The feeling that the Pizza Man had as he participated in that conversation may have been something like what the teenaged Mary felt at the beginning of her encounter with the angelic messenger on the day of the Annunciation.

2) A De Mello story on Emmanuel: "Excuse me," said a small river fish that happened to reach the ocean. . "You are older than I, so can you tell me where to find this thing they call the ocean?" "The ocean," said the older fish "is the thing you are in now." "Oh, this? But this is only salty water. What I'm seeking is the ocean," said the disappointed fish as he swam away to search elsewhere. Today's Gospel introduces God as Emmanuel, one living with us. Christmas celebration should enable us to experience this God within us and all around us.

3) "I'm the president of 7-UP!" Three men were pacing nervously outside the delivery room at a hospital when the head nurse came out beaming. To the first she said, "Congratulations, sir, you are the father of twins."

"Terrific!" said the man, "I just signed a contract with the Minnesota Twins and this'll be great press."

To the second man the nurse said, "Congratulations to you too. You are the father of healthy triplets!"

"Fantastic!" he said. "I'm the vice-president of 3-M Company. This'll be great P.R.!"

At that point the third man turned ashen and ran for the door. "What's wrong, sir? Where are you going?" called the nurse. As he jumped into his car, the man shouted, "I'm dashing to my office to resign. I'm the president of 7-UP!"

That's exactly what Mary was feeling as she listened to the angel spell out what God wanted of her: "Virgin birth?! Are you crazy? Who's going to believe that? I'll be stoned to death as soon as the neighbors see I'm pregnant! Dear God, what are you asking of me?" (Msgr. Dennis Clarke)

Introduction: Today's readings focus on the circumstances leading up to the first coming of Jesus which sets the pattern for his coming to us now and at the end of time. The Gospel stresses the key role of Mary in the work of our salvation. Today's Scripture texts describe God's promise to David and its fulfillment in Jesus, the Son of David. They also tell us that God's preparation for the coming of Jesus was full of surprises. The first reading surprises us by telling of God's promise to David that he would have a long line of royal descendants culminating with a final king, Jesus Christ. In the Responsorial Psalm, the Psalmist recalls all of God's promises, and surprises us by describing God's promise to David and his descendants in terms of a Covenant. Today's Gospel surprises us by telling us that this King would be born to an ordinary virgin, not by means of sexual relationship, but through the Holy Spirit, and that Jesus would become a descendant of David. This would occur through Joseph, Mary's betrothed husband and the legal father of her son, as Joseph was "of the house of David." The Gospel narrative surprises us also by reminding us that God's promise is best fulfilled not in buildings, or even great kings like Solomon, but rather in humble souls like Mary, who trusted in God's promise. The second reading also surprises us with Paul's explanation of the unveiling of God's plan for human salvation through Jesus. Thus, the unfolding of God's plan of salvation through history has contained many surprises.

First reading (2 Sam 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16): The historical background: Moses had led God's people in their escape from Egypt around the year 1250 B.C. Joshua led them on an invasion of Palestine around 1220. Judges ruled them from 1200 to 1025. The last Judge, Samuel, anointed for them their first King, Saul, around 1030. David succeeded Saul in 1010. David's first step was to capture Jerusalem from the Jebusites and make it the political capital of his kingdom. Once David had completed the building of his palace, he wanted a more beautiful house to

accommodate the *Ark of the Covenant* representing God's presence in the midst of His chosen people. For over 200 years, the Ark of the Covenant had been a "mobile shrine," kept in a tent so that it could be easily carried to any place to which the people moved or where Yahweh's special presence was needed. David wanted to build a special Temple in Jerusalem to house the Ark. He hoped that making Jerusalem the religious center of Israel would ensure the continued loyalty of all twelve tribes.

Though Nathan, the prophet, initially accepted the plan, as we heard in the first reading, he eventually returned to inform the king that Yahweh was more concerned with turning David's family into "His house" than with residing in a house Himself. In other words, God's presence in families is more important than is His presence in buildings. That is why the Lord spoke to David through his prophet Nathan and promised him a line of kingly succession. God said that David was not to build a house for God; rather God would build a house for David by establishing the family of David securely on the throne of Israel forever. God kept His promise for four centuries allowing the descendants of David to serve as kings of Israel in unbroken succession. But in the 6th century BC, the Babylonians conquered Judah and ended the succession of Davidic kings, prompting Israel to look for a different kind of fulfillment of God's promise to David. In other words, Israel began to look for the Messiah, a descendant of David who would come at the end of time to eradicate evil from the world. We find the beginning of the fulfillment of this hope in today's Gospel where the angel tells Mary that the son she is about to conceive will sit on "*the throne of his father David, and reign over the house of Jacob forever*" (Lk. 1: 32-33). The text reminds us that we are not on earth to do things for God, but to reflect and build on what God is doing for us.

Second Reading, (Romans 16:25-27): Since St. Paul had not founded the Church of Rome nor visited it earlier, his letter to the Romans was a kind of introduction of himself to the Christians in Rome and a partial synthesis of his theology. The section of Paul's epistle which we read today is a prayer praising God for revealing through the Gospels "*the mystery kept secret for long ages,*" to all nations. In other words, God worked through His chosen people in the past, and He can and will work in and through the Gentiles by the risen Jesus. The Church has selected this prayer in the final week of our preparation for Christmas to remind us of the sublime facts commemorated at Christmas, namely, how, in becoming man, Christ elevated our nature by uniting it with his own Divine nature and made us adopted children of God with a claim to eternal life and the possibility of sharing in God's kingdom forever.

Exegesis: The context: Luke was a Gentile converted by St. Paul at Troas about the year 50 A.D. Later, he became a fellow-worker with Paul in spreading the faith. Luke's Gentile Christian community lived a generation or more later than the apostles, after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70

Since they were not Jews, Luke had to explain to them how Jesus was the Messiah promised to the Jews by God through the prophets. He also explains how the Messiah had his human origin while retaining his Divine nature. In the Acts of the Apostles, he shows how Jesus continued to operate among his apostles and the early Church. Hence, today, the narrative of the infancy of Jesus in Luke's Gospel was intended to teach the Gentile converts their Christian heritage and to keep them focused on their new religion's mission. This "Annunciation" of the birth of Jesus also established Jesus in good-standing among the Jews, since King David, presented as Jesus' ancestor, was the most revered early King and the original Messiah (literally, "anointed as king" and earthly savior of the nation of Israel).

The unique selection of Mary and Gabriel's unique salutation: In the two annunciations described in Luke's Gospel, neither Elizabeth (Zechariah's wife) nor Mary appears to be a likely candidate for motherhood. Elizabeth is too old and Mary is a virgin engaged to Joseph, of the house of David (v. 27). Joseph's betrothal to Mary was binding, and it made Mary his legal wife. The angel's salutation to Mary, "*Hail, full of grace,*" reminds us of God's words to Moses at the burning bush, "I will be with you" (Ex 3:12), the angel's salutation Gideon, "The Lord is with you, you mighty warrior" (Jgs 6:12) and the Lord's assurance to Jeremiah, "Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee" (Jer 1:8). Luke says that Mary is perplexed by Gabriel's words, "Rejoice, blessed one!" (Greek), translated as "*Hail, full of grace.*" Mary is described as "*full of grace,*" filled with God's favor and graciousness, something which she has in no way earned, but which was given as a gratuitous gift by God. Mary is told by the angel Gabriel, the messenger of God that the Lord is literally with her. She is the new Ark, a tent and temple. God is literally and physically in her, and thus she is the greater house of God promised to David.

Mary's perplexity versus Zechariah's doubts: Mary's question, "*How can this be, since I am a virgin?*" is natural, very much like Zechariah's, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years" (1:18). However, the angel struck Zechariah mute for his unbelief because Zechariah asked for a sign -- tangible proof that the angel was telling the truth. Mary's question, on the other hand, springs from an understandable confusion. Mary is fully aware of the significance and consequences of the angel's message. In a flash, she recognizes the new challenges that will emerge in her betrothal and the crisis into which this pregnancy could throw both families (see Dt 22:13-21 and Num 5:11-31). That is why the angel reminds Mary, "*Nothing is impossible with God.*" He will "empower" her ("*the spirit will come upon you*") and "protect" her ("*overshadow you*"), two duties of a Middle Eastern husband.

The Virgin Birth: In Luke's Annunciation scene, we are face-to-face with one of the major doctrines of the Christian faith - the Virgin Birth. There are two great reasons for accepting it. (i) The clear literal meaning of this passage in Luke and

Matt.1:18-25, is that Jesus was to be born of Mary without a human father. (ii) It is natural to argue that if Jesus was, as we believe, a very special person, he would have a special entry into the world. Since this conception is the work of God's direct power, Mary's virginity is unaffected as is her integrity before her natural husband. "*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you*" (v. 35). The word "overshadow" is also used at the Transfiguration (9:34) and in a story of Peter's healing ministry (Acts 5:15). In all these places the verb clearly refers to Divine presence and power. The angel makes it clear that the child "will be holy" and "will be called Son of God" (v. 35). The word "virgin" appears three times in this passage, which shows that Luke clearly intends to emphasize Mary's sexual purity as seen in Jesus' virgin birth.

Son of David and Son of God: For Luke, the child would not only be a distant grandson of David -- he would be God's own Son. "*He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David*" On several occasions, Luke uses the phrase "Most High" to refer to God (1:76; Acts 7:48; 16:17), so that "Son of the Most High" means "Son of God." Luke uses this title several times to refer to Jesus (1:35; 22:70; Acts 9:20). "... *He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end*" (vv. 32b-33). This is a fulfillment of the promise that God made to David, who wanted to build a Temple for God as described in today's first reading. God forbade David to build the Temple, but said, "*The Lord will make you a house... I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever*" (2 Sm 7:11-13). Knowing that David's son, Solomon, built a temple, it is natural to assume that the offspring who "shall build a house," refers directly to Solomon. However, the complete fulfillment of the promise was not to be found in Solomon but in Jesus, since Solomon built a Temple that stood for only 379 years (966 BC - August, 578 BC), whereas Christ will build "a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (2 Cor 5:1).

"For nothing will be impossible with God." It is ironic that Zechariah, who asked for a sign, was punished (1:20), while Mary, who did not ask for a sign, was given one. If Mary wanted to know how she could bear a son while remaining a virgin, she need only to look to her kinswoman Elizabeth who, despite her age, was pregnant. If God could create new life in old woman, He could surely do the same in a young virgin. "*For nothing will be impossible with God*" (v. 37). Again, Luke adopts OT language. When the Lord announced the impending birth of Isaac, Sarah laughed. The Lord responded by saying, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" (Gn 18:14 -- see also Jesus' comment at Luke 18:27). This is truly Gospel - Good News - for those of us who find ourselves in impossible situations. As we walk with the Lord, however, no situation is beyond redemption.

"May it be done to me according to your word." Mary does not require confirmation, but responds in faith. She agrees to carry out the Word Gabriel has addressed to her. Her response again calls forth OT language -- Abraham's "*Here I am*" (Gn 22:1) -- Isaiah's "*Here am I, send me*" (Is 6:8) -- Hannah's "*Think kindly of your maidservant*" (1 Sm 1:18) -- Samuel's "*Here I am*" (1 Sm 3:4). Raymond Brown says "Mary's response qualifies her as Jesus' first disciple. Subsequent references to her are consistent with this pattern (Luke 1:45ff; 8:19-21; 11:27-28; Acts 1:14). Her humble acquiescence to the will of God commends itself to every believer: "*Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let what you have said be done to me.*" Mary is thus presented as the perfect disciple. Those who find out what God wants of them and accept His message as Mary did are Jesus' true followers. Those who only hear the Word but never put it into action are deceiving themselves. Christian Faith is a matter of continually making Jesus a part of our lives.

The significance of Mary's yes: Jesus' earthly existence begins with Mary's "Yes" in today's account of the Annunciation. Although we normally regard the birth of Jesus as the beginning of God's presence among us, the Church teaches that the conception of Jesus in Mary's womb by the power of the Holy Spirit took place at the moment that Mary agreed to be the mother of Jesus. If Mary had said "No," instead of "Yes," history might have been different -- although we know that God's plans would not have been frustrated. Mary's "Yes," changed the world. Her obedience to God's call changed the lives of all of us. How many times have we said "No," to God? How different would things be -- for us and for others -- if we had said "Yes," to him more often?

The frightening consequences of Mary's "Yes": Mary's choice was no easy one. As a teenage girl, betrothed but not yet married to Joseph, she was being asked to become pregnant by a Heavenly Source. Betrothal was regarded as a full commitment to one's future spouse, and for such a girl to lose her virginity was tantamount to adultery, a sin punishable by death.

Life messages: 1) We need to say a courageous and generous "Yes" to God as Mary did. True obedience comes from a free choice made in the light of what is true and good. It often requires a great deal of courage, because it can involve going against the tide of social expectations. True obedience also aims at putting oneself at the service of something/Someone that is greater than oneself by accepting what God clearly wants us to do or what He wants to do through us. Jesus' own moment of greatness, like his Mother's, came when he said "Yes," to his Father, and Jesus' own obedience is our model. Will we surrender to God and allow God to do what, from our human point of view, seems impossible? Will we surrender our agenda, our will and our kingdom to God and allow God's agenda, will and Kingdom become a reality for and through us? It is by saying, with Jesus and Mary, a wholehearted and totally unconditional "Yes," to God that

Jesus will be re-born in me or maybe even born in me for the first time. By my saying "yes," Jesus will be born or reborn in others too.

2) We need to try to learn God's plan for our lives: The Good News in today's Scripture message is not only that God is making provision for the salvation of His people, but also that He has a plan for each individual person. Just as God called Mary, He calls every mother to raise her child in the awareness of God's nurturing presence, His unconditional love and His guiding commandments. In many cases, our work for God seems rather ordinary, but each ordinary task which we carry out, fits into God's plan in ways that we cannot yet understand. God desire not the skill of our hands, but the love of our hearts. The Babe in the Manger reminds us of what God has done and is still doing for us. What are we doing in return? Let us show our gratitude to God by living as true followers of Christ: "Behold, here I am Lord, your humble and grateful servant. Let it be done to me according to Your word."

3) St. Francis said, "We are the mother of Christ when we carry him in our heart... and we give birth to him through our holy works which ought to shine on others by our example."

JOKE OF THE WEEK

1) 5-year-old Olivia, and her best friend, Claire, were participating in a nativity play at school. Claire was playing Mary, and Olivia was an angel. Before the show, a young boy was going around the dressing room repeating, "I'm a sheep, what are you?" Each child responded politely, including Olivia, who proudly declared she was an angel. The boy then turned to Claire, still struggling into her costume with her mother's help, and repeated the question to her: "I'm a sheep, what are you?" Claire simply said, "I'm Mary." Realizing he was face to face with a lead character, he felt he needed to justify his own role. "It's hard being a sheep, you know," he said with all the seriousness of a 5-year-old actor with a big part. Claire's equally serious response was humorously profound. "Yes," said Claire innocently, "but it's also hard being a virgin, you know."



("Scriptural Homilies" (B) no. 3 by Fr. Tony (akadavil@gmail.com))

14- Additional anecdotes: 1) **"Mary did you know?"** One of the most beautiful of the modern Christmas songs was written by a man who is best known, perhaps, as a comedian. His name is Mark Lowry. Lowry is also a musician of some note. He performed for many years with the Gaither Vocal band. In 1984 he was asked to pen some words for his local church choir, and he wrote a poem that began like this, "Mary, did you know that your baby boy would one day walk on water? Mary, did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters?" A few years later guitarist Buddy Greene added a perfectly matching tune and a wonderful song was born. "Mary, did you know that your baby boy has walked where angels trod? Mary, did you know when you kiss your little baby, you kiss the face of God!" Each of the little couplets touches the heart in a wonderful way. "Mary, did you know that your baby boy is Lord of all creation? Mary, did you know that your baby boy will one day rule the nations?" The song's been around now for nearly two decades. Listen for it on the radio. The most popular version is sung by Kenny Rogers and Wynonna Judd. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=AQM2rszMAfY) Mary, did you know . . . ? How could Mary know what was happening to her when the angel Gabriel came to her long ago? Only Luke tells this story and we have it in today's Gospel.

2) **"You shall name him Jesus."** Some names are unfortunate. I heard about a man who joined the Navy. His name was Tonsillitis Jackson. The Navy couldn't believe it, so they did a check on him, and discovered that indeed his name really was Tonsillitis Jackson. What's more, he had brothers and sisters who were named: Meningitis, Appendicitis, Peritonitis, and Laryngitis. A sense of identity, a sense of destiny, comes with the conferring of a name. And that is the kind of name that was given to Jesus as we read in today's Gospel. It conferred upon him a destiny, a vocation that he was to fulfill for us.

3) **"You are pregnant":** In January of 2002, a hospital in London, England, mistakenly sent letters to over 30 unsuspecting patients informing them that they were pregnant. The hospital's computer system, which normally is used to send form letters telling people that their operations have been postponed, was in the

hands of a clerical worker who hit the wrong key. And so, instead of informing patients about a rescheduled procedure, the computer sent identical form letters telling the recipients that they were "great with child." Among the recipients of the letters were six elderly men. ("Hospital Tells Elderly Men They're Pregnant," Reuters, London, (Jan. 10). Can you imagine the surprise of those six men? "Your doctor at Such-and-Such hospital is pleased to inform you that you are expecting a baby!" Quite a shock, to say the least! Some of the women were probably surprised as well. "How can it be?" some of them may have asked. "That's not possible! I think I'm going to be sick!" There was possibly some high anxiety in the homes of some women patients who received this letter. Don't you think Mary, the mother of Jesus, experienced troubling thoughts when the angel of the Lord first appeared to her? Mary was a virgin engaged to be married. She had never been with a man – even the man she was to wed.

4) "**Didn't you get my E-mail?**" As a little girl climbed up into Santa's lap, Santa asked the usual, "And what would you like for Christmas?" The little girl just stared at Santa with her mouth open and horrified look on her face for a minute, and then she gasped: "Didn't you get my E-mail?" That had to have been the same sort of horrified look that Mary must have had on her face when the Angel of the Lord appeared to her and spoke to her about God's purpose for her life.

5) "**My search is over.**" I like the story about a professor who sat at his desk one evening working on the next day's lectures. His housekeeper had laid that day's mail and papers on his desk, and he began to shuffle through them, discarding most to the wastebasket. He then noticed a magazine, which was not even addressed to him but had been delivered to his office by mistake. It fell open to an article titled "The Needs of the Congo Mission." Casually he began to read when he was suddenly consumed by these words: "The need is great here. We have no one to work the northern province of Gabon in the central Congo. And it is my prayer as I write this article that God will lay His hand on one - one on whom, already, the Master's eyes have been cast - that he or she shall be called to this place to help us." Professor Albert Schweitzer closed the magazine and wrote in his diary: "My search is over." He gave himself to the Congo. That little article, hidden in a periodical intended for someone else, was placed by accident in Schweitzer's mailbox. By chance he noticed the title. It leaped out at him. Chance? Nope. It was one of God's surprises. This morning we focus on one of the greatest surprises that ever there was, the surprise that took place when an angel by the name of Gabriel appeared to a young teenager by the name of Mary. Gabriel piled one surprise upon another. Mary and Joseph's Christmas tree had more astonishing surprises than any couple on earth had ever experienced.

6) "**Do not be afraid!**" It's an obvious understatement to say we live in a day of great fear. The language of "terror" has become the motivating mantra of our day. I did a Google search for the word "fear," and I came up with a fascinating

site called "The Phobia List"—pages of phobias, A to Z. Everything from Alliumphobia—the fear of garlic and Lachanophobia—the fear of vegetables to Zemmiphobia—the fear of the great mole rat. It even lists Ecclesiophobia—the fear of church and, get this, Homilophobia—the fear of sermons! You can even get a poster of the "Phobia List" which will cover your entire wall. We all have our own phobia lists, and the list can be as fresh as the morning papers: Daily bad news from the auto industry, uncertainty about the state of the economy or personal security. A questionable course in Iraq with no clear sense of how long it will go on, when it will end. Fear of bird flu or bad weather or a bitter diagnosis from the family doctor. Add to that, fear-mongering TV preachers and politicians who use talk of terror for political gain until the fear of terror becomes its own terror. And add to that, panic-driven newscasters who can't even give the weather without fear-filled, bated breath. It all leads to what Jane Spencer in the *Wall Street Journal* refers to as the "fear system" of our day. Into that maze of fear, we have the audacity to read the word of the angel to Mary: "Do not be afraid!"

7) "What will we do with this baby Jesus?" Wade Burton tells about a man who was riding a bus from Chicago to Miami. He had a stop-over in Atlanta. While he was sitting at a lunch counter, a woman came out of the ladies' restroom carrying a tiny baby. She asked the man, "Will you hold my baby for me, I left my purse in the restroom." He did. But as the woman neared the front door of the bus station, she darted out into the crowded street and was immediately lost in the crowd. The man couldn't believe his eyes. He rushed to the door to call the woman, but could not see her. What should he do? Put the baby down and run? When calmness settled in he went to the Traveler's Aid booth, and they soon found the real mother. The woman who had left him holding the baby was not the baby's mother. She had taken the child, perhaps to satisfy a motherly urge to hold a child. The man breathed a sigh of relief when the real mother was found. After all, what was he to do with a baby? In a way each of us is in the same situation as this gentleman. We are left with the question, "What will we do with the Baby?" Have we really come to terms with the fact that this Baby is not simply extraordinarily gifted, but that he is himself a gift from the heart of God?

8) "Favored by God with stress points?": Years ago a psychologist named Thomas Holmes developed a scale for measuring stress. He assigned numerical values to events that cause stress such as the loss of job, moving to a new city, a new relationship. Dr. Holmes even included Christmas on his stress list. He decided that just a normal Christmas was worth a hefty 14 stress points. Some of you understand. You're up to 15 or 20 stress points right now. A writer by the name of Bridget Kuhns took Dr. Holmes' scale and applied it to Mary. Holmes calculated that any pregnancy earns 40 points: an unwanted pregnancy, add 20 more. A change in living conditions (Mary stayed three months with Elizabeth), earns 25 more. Marriage to Joseph: 50 points. A change in financial status: 38

points. Surely there must have been words between them when she discovered that he had not made reservations at the inn: score 35 points for an argument with a spouse. And then the birth – 39 points: 16 for a change in sleeping habits; 15 for a change in eating habits. Not to mention all those uninvited guests: shepherds and angels coming and going and wise men from the East. Psychologist Thomas Holmes says that people get sick when they reach 200 points on his stress scale. Ms. Kuhns calculates that Mary's ordeal earned her a record 424 points. <http://home.gci.net/~stjohn1/sermons/2001/dec23.01.htm>. This, of course, does not even include the flight to Egypt. Or even more important, the experience of watching her beloved son die as a common criminal on a cross. Is this what it means to be favored of God? Evidently being favored of God does not protect you from life's bumps and bruises.

9) "\$500 for information on the missing cat." Remember the story about the guy who hated his wife's cat? He just hated that cat with a vengeance, but his wife loved the cat. One day, the cat disappeared. His wife was grief-stricken, so the man put an ad in the newspaper: "\$500 for information on the missing cat." His friend saw the ad and said to him: "Wow! \$500 for word on the cat that you hated...that's pretty risky, isn't it?" With a sly, knowing twinkle in his eye, the man responded: "It's not so risky when you know what you know." We know the end of the story. Life is not so scary when you know what you know. We know God keeps his promises and sends a Savior. We know Jesus comes and his name is called Emmanuel, meaning "God With Us.")

10) "He's out moose-hunting." There was a story years ago in the Canadian version of the *Reader's Digest* of a large moose that wandered into a residential area in Calgary, Canada. The moose ended up on the lawn of a lady named Lorna Cade. A Fish and Wildlife officer was dispatched to try to coax the magnificent animal back into the wild. After two hours of absolutely no progress, the officer finally shot the moose with a tranquilizer dart. The moose bolted down a lane and eventually collapsed on another nearby lawn. The reporters who had been following this event interviewed the lady at the house where the moose collapsed. They asked her what she thought about the moose which had passed out on her lawn. "I'm surprised," she answered, "but not as surprised as my husband will be. He's out moose-hunting." (1) Her husband had gone out looking for moose and a large moose had come to him. That is the message of Christmas. While humanity spends its time seeking after God, God comes to us in the Baby of Bethlehem.

11) Remember Humphrey the humpback whale? Humphrey became a national celebrity in 1985 when he made his way into the San Francisco Bay and headed up the Sacramento River into fresh water which, of course, could have been fatal for him. Each evening a large local television audience would tune in for the latest update on Humphrey's plight. Then national media coverage began and

the whole country watched the ensuing story. None of the traditional herding techniques were working and the world held its breath as Humphrey appeared to be dying. His skin was graying and he was becoming more and more listless. As a last ditch effort, Dr. Bernie Krause, who had recorded the sounds humpback whales made while feeding suggested using them as a possible way to lure Humphrey out. No one knew if this would work, but it was their last shot at saving him. A speaker was lowered over the side of a boat, the sounds of other humpback whales were played, and everyone stood quietly while the eerie songs reverberated through the hull. Suddenly, Humphrey emerged from the water at the bow of the ship right where the speaker was playing, and gazed at the startled crew. The Captain quickly started down the river with Humphrey following close behind. As they approached the San Francisco Bay, and the water gained in salinity, Humphrey was visibly excited and began diving deeply to everyone's delight and amazement. It was like the climax to a Hollywood film. The air was filled with helicopters and the river banks were lined with thousands of spectators all cheering Humphrey on to freedom. Don't you think that's interesting? They failed using various methods to lure Humphrey to turn around. Nothing worked until he heard the recorded sounds of other humpback whales. I guess it takes a whale to talk to whales! Now imagine God's dilemma. God sought to communicate His love and His purpose for humanity through the Law and through the Prophets, through Scripture, and through the worship of the Hebrew people in the Temple of Jerusalem. But still the people did not get it. We did not know how much God loves us and that God's ultimate plan was for us to love one another. So God did the only thing left. God became one of us in the Baby in the manger. God came to us when, intellectually, we could not reach up to Him.

13) "Somewhere, somehow, set things right." On the wall of the museum of the concentration camp at Dachau is a moving photograph of a mother and her little girl being taken to a gas chamber at Auschwitz. The girl, who is walking in front of her mother, does not know where she is going. The mother, who walks behind, does know, but there is nothing, absolutely nothing, the mother can do to stop this tragedy. In her helplessness, she performs the only act of love left to her. She places her hand over her little girl's eyes so that at least she will not have to see the horror which faces her. When people see this picture in the museum, they do not move quickly or easily to the next one. You can feel their emotion, almost hear their cries, "O God, don't let that be all there is. Somewhere, somehow, set things right." Luke's word to us this day is that God hears those prayers, and that it is into just such situations of hopelessness and helplessness that the power of God is born. It is there that God invests His treasure, lifting up the lowly and filling the hungry with good things -- setting things right.

14) "Have you found him?" Here is another De Mello story. The young hermit (*sannyasi*) came to the master in hermit robes and asked. "For years I have been seeking God. I have sought him everywhere that he is said to be: on mountain peaks, the vastness of the desert, the silence of the cloister, and the dwellings of the poor." "Have you found him?" the master asked. "No. I have not. Have you?" What could the master say? The evening sun was sending shafts of golden light into the room. Hundreds of sparrows were twittering on a nearby banyan tree. In the distance one could hear the sound of highway traffic. A mosquito droned a warning that it was going to strike...And yet this man could sit there and say he had not found God. After a while the young hermit left, disappointed, to search elsewhere. Since God can be found everywhere, we must continually look for Him and especially, perhaps in the most difficult places. That is why in the first reading today; God tells David that He cannot be contained in a man-made temple. As we prepare to celebrate the reality of Christmas, the feast of *Emmanuel*, (God-With-Us), let us be prepared to recognize the God whose presence can be known and experienced in the distressing problems of life.