

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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Isaiah 7:10-14

NRSV

Threatened by invasion by Assyria, the kings of "Aram" (v. 1, Syria) and Israel (also called "Ephraim", v. 2) have tried to convince Ahaz, king of Judah, to join their alliance; he has refused. Now they try to replace him on the throne. Isaiah has advised him to trust in God, not in human counsel.

God now tells Ahaz: ask any "sign" (v. 11), any confirmation of my promise delivered by Isaiah – any at all in all creation. ("Sheol" was the subterranean abode of the dead.) But it seems that Ahaz has already made up his mind (v. 12) so, through Isaiah, God gives to the "house of David" (v. 13) not a "sign" (v. 11) to convince Ahaz, but one which speaks to future generations. God will keep the promise he made to David (through Nathan) of an everlasting "house and ... kingdom" (2 Samuel 7:16). "The young woman" (v. 14, most likely Ahaz's wife) is pregnant; David's line will continue; she will name her son "Immanuel" (meaning *God with us*).

Psalm 40

NRSV

This psalm may have been two psalms (vv. 1-11 and 12-17) later joined through use in a liturgy. Vv. 1-3 tell of the psalmist's experience (but not what troubled him). The "desolate pit" (v. 2) may be Sheol, the subterranean abode of the dead; perhaps he was near death, and recovered. This hymn is his "new song" (v. 3) of thanksgiving. The "proud" (v. 4) trust in themselves (not God) or in materialism. The psalmist marvels at God's innumerable "deeds" (v. 5) and "thoughts" for his people. God prefers people listening to him and doing his will over sacrificing to him (v. 6). (It was thought that God kept a "book", v. 7, a record of how ethically each person lived.) In thanks, the psalmist has told "the glad news" (v. 9) in the Temple, "the great congregation". He has not held back ("restrained") in telling of God's "faithfulness" (v. 10) to him and all God has done for him, so may God not withhold his "mercy" (v. 11), "love" and fidelity to him. V. 12 tells us his situation: he is weighed down by sin. Vv. 13-17 are his prayer for deliverance; he suggests that some others are making his situation worse than it really is (v. 13), while others are supportive. He has faith that God will help him, but when?

Hebrews 10:4-10

NRSV

In v. 1, the author has said that the sacrifices offered annually in the Temple on the Day of Atonement (according to Jewish law) foreshadow (point forward to) "the good things to come" through Christ. He has then argued: if the temple sacrifices were "good things", i.e. cleansing of all inner guilt that sin causes, why did these sacrifices need to continue? (v. 2) These sacrifices, he has said, did not *wipe the slate clean* (v. 3); they can't (v. 4).

Now, quoting Psalm 40, the author explains that God prefers obedience ("a body ...", v. 5) to sacrifices: doing God's will is what counts (v. 7). In v. 8 the author interprets the psalm. He lists the four types of sacrifice offered in the Temple, offered according to Mosaic "law" (v. 8). Jesus, he says (v. 9), came to do away with "the first" (the sacrificial system) and to inaugurate "the second" (the self-offering of Jesus). It is "by God's will" (v. 10), carried out through Christ, that we have been "sanctified", been made ceremonially clean and been perfected, made complete, through Christ's death on the cross – "once for all" time.

Luke 1:26-38

NRSV

In vv. 8-17, Luke has told us about Zechariah seeing an angel in the Temple who has told him that his wife, Elizabeth, will bear a son, who will be named John. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit and "turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God ... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord".

Elizabeth is now in the "sixth month" (v. 26) of her pregnancy. God sends the angel Gabriel to Nazareth. It is through Joseph (not Mary) that Jesus is of the lineage of David. Mary's name in Hebrew is *Miryam*, meaning *exalted one* ("favoured one"). The angel, speaking Aramaic, probably said *shalom! Peace be with you!* Mary is especially "favoured" (vv. 28, 30) with God's love, and as such has long been part of God's plan. "Perplexed" (v. 29), she reflects on this greeting ("pondered", v. 29), drawing on her faith: in what way am I "favoured"? She might have panicked in the presence of God's messenger: awe can easily turn into fear.

Gabriel now tells her (vv. 30-33): she will bear a son, Son of God, a king. (God says "do not be afraid" to Abraham when he tells him he will have a son.) V. 31a recalls Isaiah 7:14, read today. Psalm 89:26-27 also speaks of the link between the dynasty of David and sonship of God. ("The Most High", vv. 32, 35, is God.) The prophet Micah often speaks of the *house of Israel* as the "house of Jacob"; in his book (4:7), we read "the LORD will reign over them ... forevermore." (Jacob is renamed *Israel* after his struggle with God at Peniel (Genesis 32:28), but we find both names used for the man and the people from that point on.)

While Mary does not doubt Gabriel's message from God, she does wonder *how can this be?*. The last clause in v. 34 can be rendered *since I have no husband*. Mary is engaged to Joseph. Gabriel, in v. 35, answers Mary's question by telling her that she will conceive through the power of the Holy Spirit (not through sexual union): a gift from God. The child will be filled with the Holy Spirit ("holy"), dedicated to the service of God, and "will be called Son of God". V. 37 is like Genesis 18:14, where God says "Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?". There (as with Elizabeth) in advanced years ("in her old age", v. 36), after a normal gestation period, Sarah gives birth to a son. Jesus' birth is even more exceptional than those of Isaac and John the Baptist. To be a "servant of the Lord" (v. 38) is special: God calls David "my servant" in 2 Samuel 7:5. Luke is doing more than telling the story of the Annunciation: he is placing Jesus in the context of Old Testament prophecies.