

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 1118: (2012) 545-566 by Raymond F. Collins.

“The homily,” said the bishops who gathered during the Second Vatican Council, “is to be highly esteemed as part of the liturgy itself” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 54). Traditionally the homily takes its theme from the scriptural readings of the day. Should the homily be devoted to a feast that is being celebrated, homilists should be encouraged to make ample reference to the Scriptures of that day.

We must bear this in mind as we come to the end of Cycle B in the three-year cycle of liturgical readings. Cycle B comes to a close with the celebration of the Feast of Christ the King of the Universe, celebrated this year on November 25. As was the case during the summer months, a reading from the Fourth Gospel, John 18:33b-37, supplements the Gospel according to Mark in our celebration of Christ the King of the Universe.

Come December 2, we celebrate the First Sunday of Advent and begin the semi-continuous reading of the Gospel according to Luke. The stories found in Luke’s Infancy Narrative are very much part of the Christmas story that we know. For the most part these stories are found only in Luke, a reality that helps us to concentrate on Luke’s telling of the good news and the points that he chooses to accentuate.

On the other hand, on the second and third Sundays of Advent our gospel readings talk about John the Baptist, the great Advent figure. Part of the reading for the Second Sunday of Advent includes material that Luke has taken from his Markan source and that he has adapted in the light of his own theology and christology. Part of the reading for the Third Sunday of Advent includes material that Luke has taken the Sayings Source, also used by Matthew. On Sundays such as these we must be careful to preach the Gospel according to Luke rather than the perhaps more familiar Gospel according to Mark or the Gospel according to Matthew. Luke has something to say; we and the congregation should listen to him.

## FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 2, 2012

### LITURGY

**Jeremiah 33:14-16** contains an oracle that promises that in the future a just ruler, a descendant of David, will arise in Israel.

**1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:2** contains Paul’s prayer for the Thessalonians along with a word of encouragement that they continue in the way of life they have begun.

**Luke 21:25-28, 34-36** begins the series of readings from the Gospel according to Luke in Cycle C. The first verses of today’s reading from Luke (vv. 25-28) represent the evangelist’s reworking of the first verses of Mark 13:24-26, read two weeks ago.

As Mark did, Luke uses traditional apocalyptic imagery but he complements the cosmic imagery (cf. Joel 3:3-4) with a mention of earthly phenomena. The description may be based on such Old Testament passages as Isa 24:19 and Ps 46:4. The evangelist’s focus is, nonetheless, on people. His perspective is the whole world (*oikoumene*), as it was in Mark.

One group will “die of fright,” whose Greek text literally means “stop breathing from fear and dread.” The group of people dying from fright was not mentioned in the earlier gospel. Rather than being in awe at the coming of the Son of Man, these people are fearful not only because of the terrible occurrences but also because of the coming of the Son of Man.

Contrasted with the group of fearful people is a group of people who are encouraged to stand proud because their redemption (cf. Luke 1:68; 2:38; 24:21; Acts 7:35) is at hand. For them, the coming of the Son of Man (cf. Mark 13:26) means deliverance. They will be free from oppression by the forces of evil and destruction. Rather than being overcome by fear and dread, they can joyfully await the coming of the Son of Man.

The conclusion of Luke’s eschatological discourse, the second part of today’s gospel reading (vv. 34-36), is an exhortation to prayer and vigilance, the appropriate preparation for the coming of the Son of Man. Among the evangelists, Luke alone has the line about becoming insensitive because of carousing and/or the concerns of daily life. The image of drunkenness, along with the suddenness of the Parousia, recalls Paul’s description of the end times in 1 Thess 5:2, 7—see Luke’s description of the attitude of the unfaithful slave awaiting his master’s return in Luke 12:45—while the mention of the ordinary cares of life is a specifically Lukan concern (cf. Luke 8:14). The image of the trap sprung on an unsuspecting animal is probably derived from Isa 24:17-23.

In verse 35, the evangelist once again emphasizes the idea of the universality of judgment introduced in verse 21 (cf. Luke 16:37). The exhortation to perpetual vigilance is accompanied by an exhortation to continuous prayer for deliverance—“pray” (*deomenoi*) is a present participle which means “keep praying”—from the forthcoming tribulations (cf. Matt 6:13). Those who pray and remain vigilant will be able to stand proud in the

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presence of the Son of Man (cf. v. 28). In Fitzmyer’s words, they will “face his judgment and come through with flying colors” (Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke X-XXIV* [Anchor Bible 28A. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985], 1356).

#### BROKEN FOR US

As we begin the Advent season, today’s gospel reading reminds us that we should ever be focused on the coming of the Son of Man. It will be an event of cosmic magnitude. Judgment will come to all human beings. Believers, however, should have no reason to cower in fear. If they remain vigilant and pray always, they will come through the ultimate test “with flying colors.”

#### THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

December 8, 2012

#### LITURGY

**Genesis 3:9-15, 20** narrates the primordial tale of the temptation of humankind.

**Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12** is an excerpt from the benediction, the *berakah*, which takes the place of the epistolary thanksgiving in the Epistle to the Ephesians.

**Luke 1:26-38** describes the announcement of Jesus’ birth. Luke’s story, paired with the announcement of John’s birth (John 1:5-25), is patterned after biblical annunciation stories, particularly Judges 13:2-7. Unlike the Matthew’s announcement of Jesus birth which focuses on Joseph (Matt 1:18-24), Luke’s story tells of the announcement made to Mary.

The two birth announcements in Luke are comparable by design but there are significant differences between them. The announcement of Jesus’ birth is to a woman, Mary; the announcement of John’s birth is to a man, Zachary. Mary is young; Zachary is old. Mary is relatively insignificant, lacking any mention of significant genealogy; both Zachary and Elizabeth were well-born. The annunciation to Mary takes place in Nazareth, a town unnamed in the bible; the announcement to Zachary takes place in the temple of Jerusalem. The announcement to Mary is of a blessing for a blessing for Israel; the message to Zachary basically concerns a blessing conferred upon the family. Mary responds to the angel’s message with faithful acceptance; Zachary is incredulous. Mary is given a sign; Zachary loses his ability to speak.

Typically biblical narratives lend verisimilitude to revelatory episodes by situating them within a determined time frame and/or in a particular locale. Thus, the annunciation story is situated in the agricultural town of Nazareth in Galilee. Gabriel, whose name means “God is my mighty one,” was one of four archangels in Jewish apocalyptic literature. In the biblical story he previously appeared in Dan 8:16; 9:21. The angel appears to a young woman (*parthenos*), named Mary, “Miriam,” who had not yet entered into her husband’s household. Since, however, she was betrothed to Joseph, any sexual intercourse between her and another man would have considered to be adultery under Jewish law (Cf. Deut 22:23-24).

The dialogue between Mary and the angel begins with a greeting which Luke Timothy Johnson translates as “Hail, Gifted Lady” (*The Gospel of Luke* [Sacra Pagina 3. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991], 36-37). The greeting suggests that Mary had found favor with God, the favor being that she has been chosen to bear the Messiah. The angel tries to allay Mary’s confusion at the announcement that she is to bear the child. So the angel explains with words that recall 2 Sam 7:11-16, particularly vv. 12-13.

Important elements of Luke’s christology are evident in the angel’s words. “The Most High” is one of Luke’s favorite ways to identify God (Luke 1:35, 76; Acts 7:48; 16:17). Jesus is the Son of God the Most High (Luke 8:28; see 6:35); Jesus is the holy one (v. 35; see Acts 3:14; 4:27, 30). He is of Davidic origin (Luke 1:69; 2:4, 11; 3:31; 6:3; 18:38-39; 20:41-44, albeit through Joseph, see v. 27 in today’s reading). Jesus will rule as king (Luke 19:11-27, 38; 22:29-30; Acts 1:3, 6). As Luke’s story unfolds both Jesus’ relationship with David and his rule are particularly linked to the resurrection.

Mary’s confusion leads to her questioning. The angel reassures her by affirming the divine origin of the child. The “overshadowing” recalls the cloud of God’s presence in the Exodus story (Exod 40:35). The pregnancy of Elizabeth is a sign that God accomplishes what he has promised.

In response, Mary acknowledges that she belongs to the household of God. She is a woman of faith, whose “yes” to God is given without reservation.

#### BROKEN FOR US

In 1792, John Carroll, bishop of Baltimore, the first American bishop, consecrated the new nation of the United

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States to Mary, Mother of Jesus, under the title of the Immaculate Conception. A little more than a half century later, in 1847, Pope Pius IX formalized Carroll’s consecration by proclaiming Mary under the title of the Immaculate Conception as the Patroness of the United States.

That people in the United States look to Mary under this title gives this feast particular relevance for Catholics in the United States. In his commentary on this passage, Johnson observes that Mary represents Israel; Rene Laurentin described her as the Daughter of Zion. Today we might reflect on the similarities among our nation, Israel, and Mary. Like Israel and Mary we had humble origins, yet as a nation we have been highly gifted. Like Israel and Mary we have a role in the world that extends beyond ourselves.

For all this we should be grateful. Yet we must also ask whether with Mary we respond with an unequivocal yes to God’s demand. As a nation are we prepared to say, “May it be done to us according to your word”?

## SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 9, 2012

### LITURGY

**Baruch 5:1-9** speaks poetically about Jerusalem and Israel, restored to their former glory.

**Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11** contains most of the beautiful epistolary thanksgiving at the beginning of Paul’s letter to God’s holy people in the Roman colony of Philippi.

**Luke 3:1-6** represents the third time in his story about Jesus that the evangelist Luke presents “historical” material in order to show the importance of what he is writing about. The temporal setting would speak meaningfully to his Hellenistic audience.

A modern-day historian would be hard pressed to correlate precisely all of the details in Luke’s account but there is no doubting his purpose in referring to secular figures. Referencing the emperor, an imperial official, local rulers, and religious authorities, Luke shows the importance of the ministry of John the Baptist for his story and beyond. John is identified as a prophetic figure. The evangelist does not explicitly call John a prophet; rather Luke tells his readers that John is a prophet by telling them that John is one to whom “the word of God” has come. John belongs to the line of biblical prophets and is arguably, at least from Luke’s perspective, the last in the line of prophets.

With his presentation of John the Baptist, Luke begins to make use of the Gospel according to Mark, the principal source for the narrative that follows. In addition to identifying John as a prophet, the evangelist also describes him as “the son of Zechariah,” an epithet that links the present narrative to the birth narrative in chapter 1 (Luke 1:5-25; 57-80). Operating in the area around the Jordan, John proclaimed “a baptism of repentance (*baptisma metanoias*) for the conversion of sins (cf. Luke 1:77),” a “conversion-baptism” of sorts (cf. Johnson, *Luke*, 64).

Luke follows his Markan source in using a citation of Isa 40:3a to portray John’s ministry in biblical terms. Unlike Mark (and Matthew), Luke continues the citation, reprising Isa 40:3b-5 in verses 4b-6. These verses use the imagery of road construction to speak about the royal road of the Lord. Luke’s extension of the Isaian quotation to include these verses allows him to introduce the theme of universal salvation, a leitmotif of the Lukan narrative (cf. Luke 1:69; 2:11; 19:9, 10). Salvation for all is made available in Jesus’ preaching, of which John’s preaching is an anticipation.

### BROKEN FOR US

Along with Isaiah, John the Baptist is a traditional Advent figure. Today’s homily might appropriately focus on the unique features of Luke’s presentation of the Baptist. Two of these are particularly important. First of all, salvation history takes place within the context of secular and religious history. The expression of our faith, as it develops throughout Advent, cannot be blind to contemporary historical and political circumstances nor can it be unaffected by the religions of the world in which we live. This latter reality is particularly important for the exposition of today’s gospel reading since Luke alone, using Isaiah, proclaims that the ministry of John the Baptist takes place so that, “all flesh might see the salvation of God.”

## THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 16, 2012

### LITURGY

**Zephaniah 3:14-18a**, from the last chapter in the Book of Zephaniah, urges Israel to be joyful and praise God

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because God has lifted the sanction that he had previously meted out for Israel.

**Philippians 4:4-7** similarly urges people to be joyful, now that the Lord is near.

**Luke 3:10-18** begins with a passage that is found only in the Gospel according to Luke. With these verses (vv. 10-14) the evangelist provides content for the Baptist’s prophetic ministry, announced in last week’s gospel lection (cf. Luke 3:22).

The three-fold question is a literary technique, later used by Luke in Acts 2:37. The questions underscore a major Lukan theme, namely, that the use of one’s possessions is a response to God’s presence among his people.

The first question, from the crowds, is indicative of this theme. John answers the crowd’s question, not by telling them to repent nor by telling them to offer sacrifice, rather John tells the crowd that had come out to be baptized to share their possessions, their clothing and their food, with those less fortunate. The second question comes from tax-collectors, publicans, generally toll-collectors who worked the border areas on behalf of the Romans. They earned their living from what they were able to get beyond the amount that was to be given to the Roman authorities. The tax-collectors are told not to be greedy in exacting their commissions. The soldiers were probably not Roman soldiers but locals who had enlisted in the service of “King” Herod Antipas (cf. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.5.1). The Baptist exhorts these soldiers not to shake people down--the literal translation of the Greek translated as “practice extortion”—not to accuse people falsely, and to be content with their rations.

Verse 15 likewise has no parallel in the Synoptic Gospels but it fits well with the historical context of first-century Judaism. In content, the verse is similar to John 1:24-25. During the second and first centuries B. C. E. and until the coming on the scene of Simon bar Kokhbar at the time of the third Jewish revolt in 132-136 C.E., there was a strong expectation among Jews that God would provide a deliverer for his people. Many thought that the awaited deliverer would be an “anointed one,” a “Messiah”—at root, a transliteration of the participial form of the Hebrew verb “anoint”—a king like David. The verse provides a narrative setting for the self-relativizing statement that follows.

That statement is taken from the Sayings Source, “Q,” used by Matthew and Luke. This source adds “fire” to John’s self-derogating statement as narrated by Mark (Mark 1:7-8). Does the fire suggest judgment or purification? The linkage of fire and the Holy Spirit in verse 16 suggests that baptism is a ritual of purification, but verse 17 (cf. Luke 3:9) indicates that the idea of judgment remains part of the picture.

Since Luke has given an example of John’s preaching (*euangelizeto*) to the people, he can add “and so forth” to the passage. The evangelist does so in verse 18.

## BROKEN FOR US

Luke illustrates the preaching of John the Baptist with a series of remarks on the accumulation and use of one’s possessions. Not only is this a major theme of his gospel, it is also a topic that is apropos during the Advent season.

The Advent season should be a season of preparing for the coming of the Lord rather than the season for Christmas shopping as our mercantile society wants us to think about the days and weeks before Christmas. How do we use our possessions during this season? Do we go all out to acquire possessions for the members of our families? Or do we think that a significant amount of our Christmas spending should be for the less fortunate, of whom there are many, in our society?

Do we use these weeks to allow our children to build their expectations as to what they will receive as Christmas gifts? Or do we use these weeks to teach our children that Jesus wants us to share what we have with others?

## FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 23, 2012

### LITURGY

**Micah 5:1-4a** contains an oracle that announces the coming of a new Davidic king.

**Hebrews 10:5-10** is a sharp reminder that doing the will of God is more important than cultic worship. The anonymous author of this text voices a sentiment similar to that of the scribe in Mark 12:28b-34, the gospel reading of November 4.

**Luke 1:39-45** describes Mary’s visitation of Elizabeth. The narrative presupposes the preceding birth announcements, that of John (Luke 1:5-25) and that of Jesus (Luke 1:26-38).

Rife with Semitisms, the narrative describes Mary’s continued response to Gabriel’s announcement. Not only was Mary pregnant; so, too, was her kinswoman Elizabeth who had conceived at a relatively advanced age

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(Luke 1:36). Quickly and eagerly Mary goes to the Judean town in which Elizabeth lives, the town to which Zechariah had returned after his temple service (Luke 1:23), to greet Elizabeth. Luke does not name the town; later Christian tradition identified it as the village of ‘Ain Karim, about five miles west of Jerusalem. To this day it remains a place of Christian pilgrimage.

Luke interprets the baby’s movement in Elizabeth’s womb as she hears Mary’s voice as her unborn child’s recognition of Jesus. The baby is said to have leapt for joy at Jesus’ presence (cf. Gen 25:22). John’s prophetic insight is shared by his mother who, filled with the Holy Spirit (cf. Luke 1:15), acknowledges Mary to be the mother of the Lord (*kurios*). Throughout Luke-Acts, the evangelist often uses this biblical epithet “Lord” as a title for Jesus (Luke 2:11; 7:13; 10:1; 11:39; 12:42; 17:6; 18:6; 19:8, 31; 24:3, 34; Acts 2:34; etc.).

The double macarism of verse 42 proclaims Mary to be blessed because of the child she was carrying, the child whose dignity was recognized by John’s movement *in utero*. Another macarism—since it uses the technical term *makaria*, “blessed,” the macarism of verse 45 can be counted as the first true beatitude in Luke’s gospel story—proclaims Mary to be blessed because of her faith, her trust in the word of the Lord conveyed by Gabriel. The narrative assumes that Elizabeth was familiar with the promise made to Mary.

Between the two macarisms, the evangelist describes a jubilant Elizabeth, elated by the pregnant Mary’s visit. Elizabeth’s joy is a first realization of the angel’s promise of joy and gladness made to Zachary (Luke 1:14; cf. Luke 1:47). The dawning messianic era is a time of eschatological gladness.

#### BROKEN FOR US

It is often said that prayer is a major theme in the Gospel according to Luke, not only because of the numerous times that it describes Jesus as praying but also because of the number of prayer formularies that it contains. One such formula is the macarism of verse 42 which was later embedded in the “Hail Mary.”

The proclamation of today’s gospel reveals a number of themes that a skilled homilist can exploit. First is Mary’s concern for an older, pregnant woman with whom she stayed for about three months even though she herself was pregnant (Luke 1:56). Another is Mary’s faith, her trust in God’s word, for which she is praised by Elizabeth. Still another is the eschatological joy of the messianic era. And not to be overlooked is that both women accepted the role that God had discerned for them in the history of salvation.

#### THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD

December 25, 2012

#### LITURGY OF THE MASS DURING THE DAY

For the Mass at Midnight see *Emmanuel* 116 (2010) 570-572; for the Mass at Dawn, *Emmanuel* 117 (2011) 561-562.

**Isaiah 52:7-10**, from Second Isaiah, uses the language of “glad tidings” (*euangelion*) to describe the message that, “Your God is King.”

**Hebrews 1:1-6**, the prologue of the “letter” to the Hebrews, proclaims the mission and dignity of the unidentified “Son.”

**John 1:1-18** is the prologue of the Fourth Gospel. Familiar to older generations of Catholics as the “last gospel,” John 1:1-18 is appointed as the gospel lection for the Second Sunday after Christmas but it is generally preempted by the gospel reading for the Feast of the Epiphany, translated from January 6.

The prologue is perhaps the most celebrated and beautiful passages in the Fourth Gospel. It is a dense synthesis of the evangelist’s theology and christology. Years ago I described the passage as the oldest commentary on the Fourth Gospel (see *The Bible Today* 98 [1978], 1769-1775).

The prologue is a hymn, whose cadence is interrupted by two prose sections. These prose sections (vv. 6-8, 15), referring to John [the Baptist], break the hymnic structure and allow the prologue to be divided into three sections: 1) the Word of God becoming the Light of the World (vv. 1-5); 2) the Incarnation of the Word of God (vv. 6-14); and 3) the Revealer, the only Son, turned toward the Father (vv. 15-18). The dense theological content of the prologue makes any attempt to offer an exegesis of the passage in just a few lines a rather inadequate exercise, but I can offer at least a few highlights found in each of the three sections.

The beginning of the first section (vv. 1-5) alludes to the creation story of Genesis 1, providing a cosmic setting not only for the prologue but also for the entire Fourth Gospel. The section continues with a poetic description of the intimate relationship between the Word and God [the Father]. The subtleties of the Greek text *theos en ho logos*, best translated as it is in the NAB as “the Word was God,” allow the evangelist to distinguish the Word from God,

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but that is not apparent in the English translation. Having affirmed the pre-existence of the Word, the first section of the prologue goes on to speak of the role of the Word in creation and the presence of the Word among human beings. Using the Genesis-based imagery of light and darkness, it concludes by stating that the world resists the Word but that, nonetheless, the light continues to shine. Darkness does not overcome it.

The second section (vv. 6-14) begins with a narrative piece (vv. 6-8), whose opening words, “There was a man named John,” are a classic beginning to a story. This narrative unit (vv. 6-8) identifies John [the Baptist] as the one who was sent by God to bear witness. In the Fourth Gospel, John is “John the Witness.” Bearing witness to the Word, the “light,” is the mission that God has assigned to John.

Reprising the christological focus of the prologue, the second section then describes the Word as the one and only authentic light, the “true” (*alethinon*) light (v. 9). Present in the world of human beings, the Word is rejected by his own people. There were, nonetheless, people who did accept the Word. These are God’s children. They are such not because of any human activity but because of God’s initiative, his gift.

The prologue then uses biblical terms to describe the incarnation of the Word, the only explicit affirmation of “incarnation” in the New Testament. Verses 4c-4 and 9 have prepared the reader for this solemn affirmation. The “dwelling (*eskenosen*) among us” recalls God’s tenting among his people (cf. Sir 24:8 and passim). Mention of God’s “glory” (*doxa/kabod*) appears throughout the Old Testament (cf. Exod 25:8; 33:22; and passim). The evangelist highlights not only the incarnation itself but also the fact that the incarnation enables the Word to communicate the reality of God to us, “we have seen his glory.” Initially, the “we” was the Johannine community.

Another narrative piece (v. 15) begins the third section of the prologue (vv. 15-18). John the Witness’s words are similar to those found in Matt 3:11, but the evangelist known as John adds a word about the Word’s pre-existence. Since the Word has entered the world of human beings, we—again the Johannine community—have received grace from his “fullness” (*pleroma*), a word whose nuance was much discussed in the philosophical circles of the author’s day. What we have received, “grace in place of grace” can better be understood as grace upon grace. The law of Moses was one gift of God to his people; the grace and truth that came through Jesus Christ is a far greater gift. Only now, at the end of the hymn, does the evangelist reveal that the enigmatic Word is the man known as Jesus Christ.

The prologue concludes by saying that the one “who is at the Father’s side” (*ho on eis ton kolpon tou patros*), the one uniquely oriented to the Father, the only Son, is the one who revealed (*exegesato*) him. The word “exegesis,” meaning explanation or interpretation, is derived from the root of this Greek word.

#### BROKEN FOR US

Before preaching the prologue, the homilist should take care to read it as a piece of poetry, with prose inserts. The attentive reading of the text is the homilist’s first tool in helping the congregation to understand the text.

In this brief commentary on the text, I have repeatedly used the phrase “the Fourth Gospel.” I have done so by design. Contemporary biblical scholarship is virtually unanimous in affirming that the Fourth Gospel was not written by John, the Son of Zebedee and one of The Twelve. Although the usage is traditional, reference to “John’s gospel” easily leads to a misunderstanding among the people as to the gospel’s origins and significance.

The prologue is so full of theology and christology that it is a difficult text to preach. Perhaps the homilist should concentrate on the beginning and on the end of the reading. From a cosmic perspective there is only one revealer, the only Son of the Father who came among us.

#### HOLY FAMILY OF JESUS, MARY, AND JOSEPH

December 30, 2012

LITURGY: The Readings for Year C

**1 Samuel 1:10-22, 24-28** tells about the activity of Hannah, the mother of the infant Samuel, and how she dedicated her son to the Lord while he was still quite young.

**1 John 3:1-2, 21-24** describes what it means for us to be children of the Father, namely, that we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.

**Luke 2:41-52**, the final pericope in the Lukan infancy narrative (Luke 1-2), has no parallel in the other canonical gospels. It is a beautiful tale of family drama, one to which many contemporary families can relate. It finds its place in Luke’s narrative, written within a culture where similar stories of youthful prodigies were not unknown (e. g., Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, 5; Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, 1:7-8; Philo, *Life of Moses*, 1:21). The

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evangelist’s concluding words about the growth of Jesus (v. 52) parallel similar words about the growth of John the Baptist in Luke 1:80.

The story is interesting for the insights into Jewish customs that it provides, notably, that at the age of twelve an adolescent male would join the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the celebration of the Feast of Passover. This feast, along with the Feasts of Booths and Weeks, was one of the three Jewish pilgrimage festivals. Rabbinic literature gives more than one example of youths taking on the yoke of the law at about this age (see, for example, the Mishnaic tracts *Pirke Aboth* 5:21 and *Niddah* 5:6 as well as *Genesis Rabbah* 63:10).

The passage illustrates Luke’s interest in the Temple and the Law as well as his portrayal of Jesus’ coming from a pious Jewish family. Although women were not obliged to participate in the festival pilgrimages, Luke portrays Mary as a participant. This is an example of Luke’s highlighting of the role of women, particularly Mary, in the story of Jesus. Mary’s presence recalls that of Hannah going up to the temple in 1 Kings 1, the first reading in today’s liturgy. Mary’s keeping the memories in heart (v. 51b) recalls her earlier pondering (Luke 1:19). More subtly the narrative highlights the importance of finding what was lost, a motif particularly exploited by the evangelist in Chapter 15.

In the history of the interpretation of the pericope, particular attention has generally been devoted to the brief dialogue in verses 48-49 and the evangelist’s narrative comment in verse 50. Mary and Joseph were pained when they couldn’t find Jesus (cf. Luke 2:35). Jesus’ initial response to them when they finally found him appears to be somewhat reproachful. Didn’t they realize what he was up to? Jesus explains that he was under some sort of constraint to be “about his Father’s business,” a better translation of the Greek *en tois tou patros mou* than the NRSV’s “in my Father’s house.” Not even Joseph and Mary understood the complexity of Jesus and his mission (cf. Luke 8:10; 9:45; 18:34; Acts 3:17; 7:25).

#### BROKEN FOR US

Luke’s infancy narrative is more than a collection of beautiful stories about Jesus. It is even more than an author’s literary attempt to compare Jesus and John the Baptist. At bottom the infancy narratives are the evangelist-theologian’s way of presenting a narrative christology. He wants his readers to understand who Jesus is from the very outset of his narrative.

From this perspective, today’s gospel reading points to the Temple as a significant locale for Jesus’ activity (20:21, 28, 389; 21:17; 22:11). His back-and-forth with the teachers shows Jesus to be someone who was knowledgeable about the law. Most of all the reading proclaims that Jesus was someone who had to be about his Father’s business.