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Finding a path to Christmas joy

By Father Albert Shamon Sunday's readings: (R3) Luke 1:39-45; (R1) Micah 5:1-4; (R2) Hebrews 10:5-10.

Four biblical figures dominate the preparation for Christmas: David and Isaiah (or his contemporary Micah), John the Baptist and Mary.

The Gospel readings of the second and third Sundays of Advent center on John the Baptist. The fourth Sunday looks forward to Christmas Day; and the central figure is, of course, the Blessed Virgin Mary.

In this Sunday's Gospel, Mary visits Elizabeth. She is remarkably silent in this passage. She says not a word. Mary was always a woman wrapped in silence, but she was one of great action. She "set out, proceeding in haste into the hill country and, greeted Elizabeth." We are not told what her actual greeting was, as though the Word within her was greeting enough. However, we are told of the reaction to her greeting.

Actually, it was more than a reaction: it was the fulfillment of a prophecy. When Gabriel announced the birth of John to Zechariah, he said that the child would "be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb." At Mary's greeting, "the baby stirred in Elizabeth's womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit." It was as though the Holy Spirit were imparted to her from the child in her womb. Thus inspirited, Elizabeth twice proclaimed Mary blessed.

Elizabeth's first blessing echoed the praises addressed to the heroines of Israel in Scripture. Jael, who killed the fleeing Canaanite general Sisera with a mallet and tent peg, was praised for her valor in the song of Deborah: "Blessed be Jael among women" (Judges 5:24). Judith, imitating Jael, destroyed Holofernes, the enemy of God's people. For this, Uzziah blessed her: "Blessed are you, daughter, by the Most High God, above all the women on earth; and blessed be the Lord God" (Judith 13:18).

At the annunciation to Mary, God was intervening in Israel's history by sending His Son, bringing "salvation from our enemies," as Zechariah would proclaim (Luke 1:71), so Mary too is declared "blessed are you among women." She is the new heroine, blessed as was Jael or Judith, not for deed of might, but for the more courageous act of saying "yes" to God.

Elizabeth's second blessing of Mary is not for what God has done to her, choosing her to be the mother of His Son, but because of

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what she herself has done. Unlike Zechariah, who had doubted the angel's words, Mary "trusted that the Lord's words to her would be fulfilled."

Now, it was the Holy Spirit who revealed to Elizabeth that Mary is "mother" and her child is "Lord." The role of the Holy Spirit is an important Lucan theme. In the Acts of the Apostles, which Luke also wrote, the role of the Holy Spirit is so pronounced that the Acts could well be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit.

Another major Lucan theme is joy. Joy explains the "stirring" of the babe in Elizabeth's womb, Elizabeth's lyrical outburst proclaiming the blessedness of Mary, and also the canticles of praise of Mary (her Magnificat) and of Zechariah (his Benedictus) which immediately follow.

As Christmas nears, joy heightens. But where can true joy be found?

Not in unbelief: Voltaire was an infidel of the most pronounced type. He wrote: "I wish I had never been born."

Not in pleasure: Lord Byron lived a life of pleasure if anyone did. He wrote: "The worm, the canker, the grief are mine alone."

Not in money: Jay Gould, the American millionaire, had plenty of that. When dying, he said: "I suppose I am the most miserable man on earth."

Not in position and fame: Lord Beaconsfield enjoyed more than his share of both. He wrote: "Youth is a mistake; manhood a struggle; old age a regret."

Not in military glory: Alexander the Great conquered the known world in his day. Having done so, he wept in his tent because, he said, "there are no more worlds to conquer."

Where, then, is joy to be found? The answer is simple: in Christ alone. And the way to Christ is the Holy Spirit, through whom Mary conceived Christ and Elizabeth discovered Him. Therefore, the path to joy is through the Holy Spirit and Christ. Merry Christmas simply means a spirit of joy in Christ. A Merry Christmas then to one and all.

Undertaking the journey of a lifetime

By Cindy Bassett

"Son, if you are certain that you want to do this, then I will not deny you," the young man's father said. "But to me, it seems a futile quest. Perhaps you should study your findings again."

"Father, it has been nearly two years now since the light first made its appearance in the heavens," Balthasar replied. "And lately, the force seems to grow stronger — surely an indication that the event which it foreshadows is about to occur. I am certain that this quest shall not prove fruitless. It was you, father, who taught me to pursue the truth at all costs. This is the journey of my lifetime."

His father hesitated, still not convinced. "Tell me again what you and the other astrologers have concluded about this great light," he asked.

"When it first appeared in the sky, we dismissed it as merely a flaming comet," Balthasar began. "However, as time went on, we became convinced that this illumination was produced by the lining up of several major planets in the universe — an extremely rare phenomenon."

"We have determined that these two planets are Jupiter, the symbol for kingship, and Venus, the sign of birth and motherhood. Somewhere in the near future, a new king will be born," he concluded.

"You intend to travel west. Nearly all of these lands are ruled by the Romans. Does that mean you go in pursuit of a foreign king to offer your allegiance?" his father wondered.

"If the prophecies concerning this child are correct, then he will be no ordinary ruler," Balthasar responded. "He is destined for something much greater. This king will be a 'light to all nations' and bring justice to the entire world."

"It is King Herod who rules the region you head for," his father protested. "If a son of his

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is about to be born, I don't suppose the Hebrews of that area would agree with your conclusions about Roman justice?"

"You surprise me with your narrow view of things, father," Balthasar said. "I am talking of something much greater than a Roman king. In the very beginning, it was one God who created the entire universe. It was a great light that came into existence because of him. I believe that out of this same light will come a great deliverer for all people."

"May this great light, which is the source of all truth, guide and sustain you on your journey," his father said as he watched him leave. Balthasar was joined by two other Magi, Gaspar and Melchior, in his journey toward the great light. Together they traveled across the desert for hundreds of miles.

When the Magi reached Jerusalem, Herod summoned them to a meeting. After hearing their conclusions, he told them: "When you find the child, return here and advise me of his whereabouts. For I, too, would like to go and worship this new king."

But Balthasar had a strange dream in which an angel warned him about Herod's true intentions. So the three Magi returned to their own countries by a different route.

Scripture reference: Matthew, Chapter 2:1-9. Meditation: Dear Jesus, may the light of your love always guide us in our own journey back to you.