

A Christmas Weave

by Tom Redmond, SM

During the full four weeks of Advent we have stopped at four specific stations to pause for a closer and more intense look at some of the people and themes of Advent. Now that we have arrived at our destination I propose the metaphor of knitting, of working with yarn, to help us understand the many threads that go into creating the Christmas story.

Many of us have a talent for working with yarn in needlepoint, crocheting, knitting, or maybe even weaving; if we have not had the personal experience of this, we have observed someone sitting in contemplative concentration weaving together a variety of colors and textures to create a garment or a fine work of art. In this reflection I propose a Christmas Weave from the readings of the Christmas liturgies to help us better appreciate the rich texture of God's covenant and the depth and richness of the Christmas story.

There are four selections of readings for the Masses at Christmas, each holding a unique piece of the Christmas narrative. These selections are the following:

1. the Vigil Mass on Christmas Eve afternoon
2. the midnight Mass
3. the Mass at dawn
4. the Christmas Mass during the day.

Though we will not go to all four liturgies this Christmas, we quite possibly have attended all four Christmas Masses throughout the years. In this Christmas reflection I would like to interlace two passages from the Old Testament with the Christmas Gospels from all four Masses. I offer this intertwine of Old and New Testament readings to help us see and savor God's plan, God's desire for us, and indeed for all of creation.

In his book, *Spiritual Direction and the Encounter with God*, William A. Barry, SJ, develops a concept that has stayed with me during the years. In chapter 2 ("Understanding God's Presence in the World") Barry frames his thesis by citing a lecture series given by the philosopher John MacMurray. Barry suggests our encounter with the Divine flows out of the one intent of God: relationship!¹ If God has one intent for all of creation, all that God says and all that God does throughout all of history flows from this intention. The rich readings in the Christmas liturgies offer a view of salvation history that supports Barry's thesis of God's one intent.

The First Strand: Reaching back to almost the middle of the 700s B.C. the first reading at the midnight Mass (Is 9:1-6) speaks of hope in the midst of disaster. As king of the Northern Kingdom, Ahaz saw the alignment with Assyria as the only way to survive the oncoming threat from Damascus. The Prophet Isaiah tried to correct the king's perception, but Ahaz refused Isaiah's intervention (to rely on the covenant with God as source of salvation politically, socially, and religiously), which led to disaster as Judah was assimilated into other cultures. In the midst of this darkness and gloom is a promise of future hope, a promise that includes the image of a child who will mature into a faithful and mighty leader, a prince of peace. This is the context for the first reading at the Mass at midnight.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (First reading at midnight Mass, Is 9:1-6)

More than 300 years later, in its post-exilic period, the Southern Kingdom of Israel is in the process of rebuilding the Temple, their homeland, and their covenant-relationship with God. The task is daunting in more ways than one; it is easy to lose sight of the essentials. The first reading from the Christmas vigil Mass (Is 62:1-5) is an expression of intense hope and comfort from God! Writing in such reassuring words, in the tone of Hosea and the more positive selections of Jeremiah, Third Isaiah shares God's words of a renewed covenant relationship.

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet, until her righteousness goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a burning torch. . . . You shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. . . . You shall be called

“My Delight”, . . . For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your maker marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

(First reading at the vigil Mass, Is 62:1-5)

For Reflection at the End of this First Thread

1. From Israel’s perspective what do you sense stirs in their minds and hearts as they listen to these words of a renewed covenant?
2. How do these words of consolation fit into your life?
3. The antiphon for the Responsorial Psalm (Ps 89) reflects Israel’s response so well: “Forever I will sing of the goodness of the Lord!” What stirs in you as you sing this response?

The Second Strand: Recalling Barry’s thesis of God’s one intent for all of creation (relationship) and using the two Old Testament readings as our first yarn, let us pick up a second strand—the Gospels of Christmas. These rich stories in the Christmas liturgy underscore the reality of the Incarnation, the fulfillment of Israel’s longing, the continuing unfolding of God’s abiding Word among us; yet each of the Gospels holds a different and unique scene of the Christmas story. Let us look at these Gospels and then see how they interlace to help us understand the one intent of God.

We are all quite familiar with the Annunciation to Mary: Gabriel’s statements, Mary’s question, the angel’s response, and Mary’s fiat, her yes. “Be it done to me according to your Word.” A closer look at the Christmas Gospels shows us more annunciations; it is as if God cannot stop communicating to humanity about God’s one desire!

At the vigil Mass on Christmas Eve afternoon we read from Matthew’s Gospel. Because of her pregnancy, Joseph is resolved to divorce Mary quietly so as to avoid causing her shame, but in a dream Joseph has his own annunciation! “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife.” Matthew records no words spoken by Joseph, only his response: “when he awoke he did what the angel told him.”

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put

her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus. (Gospel at the vigil Mass, Mt 1:18-25)

The next Gospel story, at the Mass at midnight, contains two parts. Luke not only describes the reason for the trip to Bethlehem by Joseph and the pregnant Mary and declares the birth of the child in a manger but also tells of the appearance of the angel to the shepherds. "The angel of the Lord appeared to them . . . and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, 'fear not, for behold I bring you good news of great joy.'"

Another annunciation! It is as if God cannot not communicate all that God wants to share with humanity, and in God's one desire all of creation sings out! "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom God is pleased!'"

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will

be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom God is pleased!" (Gospel at midnight Mass, Lk 2:1-14)

Staying with Luke, the Gospel for the Mass at dawn is the account of the shepherds' response, a visitation! "They went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger." Here again we see Barry's thesis of God's one intent: relationship. Through these annunciations God shares something of God's self; the human response is a desire, maybe even a need, to share it. And in the wisdom of Luke he brings us back to Mary and her example of a healthy attitude with all of this, "Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart." A wonderful example of the contemplative stance!

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (Gospel at Mass at dawn, Lk 2:15-20)

There is one more Gospel to look at among the Christmas liturgies, that of the Mass during the day. I am somewhat hesitant to touch upon this Gospel because it is so profound; it would be simpler to end this Christmas weave with Luke's account of the shepherds' annunciation and visitation. But in another way, the Christmas message is not complete without this fourth Gospel. Reminding us of Barry's thesis of God's one intent, the prologue of the Gospel of John connects God's word "Light" spoken at the beginning of creation with Jesus as the light of the world, God's Word become flesh and living among us, the glory of the Father's only Son. The power and richness of this fourth Gospel are in the words "light" and "grace." As in the beginning God saw it all as good, indeed very good, God's Word becomes one with us to show us our potential, our value, and our goodness.

In keeping with the brevity of these reflections I will let the words of the Gospel speak for themselves. Here is the Gospel for the Mass during Christmas day.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him not one thing came into being. In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. . . . The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of humans, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (Gospel for Mass during Christmas day, Jn 1:1-5, 9-14)

For Reflection at the End of this Second Thread:

1. Which of the four Christmas Gospels is most dear to you? Which holds the most meaning for you?

2. Sit with the words that are most evocative for you:
 - a) What is stirring in your soul as you contemplate these words?
 - b) What is it you want to say to God?
 - c) What is it you sense God saying to you in all of this?

One Last Strand: Throughout this weave of the readings from the Christmas liturgies I have held onto Father Barry's thesis that God has one intent for all of creation: God desires to be in relationship with us. This one intent is first expressed so clearly in the creation story in Genesis 1; creation begins as God speaks out the word "Light," and after each day of creation God saw it all as good! Through the varied messages of the Prophets we read of God's desire and invitation for a renewed relationship. Then, as I have suggested here, at the beginnings of the Christmas Gospels there are multiple annunciations as God reveals God's self and God's desire to be one

with humanity. What is to prevent us from considering more annunciations from God?

In conclusion may I offer this prayer inspired from Psalm 139:

O God, in an act of love You took a thread from my father and a thread from my mother and knit me together in my mother's womb, creating my inmost self. For the wonder of myself, for the wonder of all creation, I thank you O Gracious God! Each of these speaks of Your one intent, Your one desire, to be in relationship. Examine me O God and know my heart, guide me on the road to eternal relationship with You. Amen.

A Blessed Christmas to you!

Notes:

1. William A. Barry, SJ, *Spiritual Direction and the Encounter with God* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992), p. 20.