

## Divergence on the Lectionary - The Feast of the Nativity III

### First Reading

Isaiah 52:7–10

How beautiful upon the mountains  
are the feet of him who brings good news,  
who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness,  
who publishes salvation,  
who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”  
The voice of your watchmen—they lift up their voice;  
together they sing for joy;  
for eye to eye they see  
the return of the LORD to Zion.  
Break forth together into singing,  
you waste places of Jerusalem,  
for the LORD has comforted his people;  
he has redeemed Jerusalem.  
The LORD has bared his holy arm  
before the eyes of all the nations,  
and all the ends of the earth shall see  
the salvation of our God. (ESV)

### Second Reading

Hebrews 1:1–4 (5-12) Optional verses in italics

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

*For to which of the angels did God ever say,*

*“You are my Son,  
today I have begotten you”?*

*Or again,*

*“I will be to him a father,  
and he shall be to me a son”?*

*And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says,*

*“Let all God’s angels worship him.”*

*Of the angels he says,*

*“He makes his angels winds,  
and his ministers a flame of fire.”*

*But of the Son he says,*

*“Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,  
the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom.  
You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;  
therefore God, your God, has anointed you  
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.”*

*And,*

*“You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning,  
and the heavens are the work of your hands;  
they will perish, but you remain;  
they will all wear out like a garment,  
like a robe you will roll them up,  
like a garment they will be changed.  
But you are the same,  
and your years will have no end.” (ESV)*

Gospel Text

John 1:1–14

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 was

not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

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 man, 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. (ESV)

## Comments and Questions for Discussion

### Introduction

If you've read the Divergence on the Lectionary for Christmas I or II, you'll probably want to skip the next few paragraphs. I thought it a good idea to begin the comments on I, II, and III with the same explanation of the origins and emphases of the three Christmas Masses, so that someone coming to any one of them would have the same information. And I'm too lazy to rewrite it to keep it interesting, so here's my copy and past from the Lectionary for Christmas I with only the tiniest of edits).

When I began to work on the lectionary readings for Christmas, after years and years of ministry and preaching on these texts every December, I finally asked myself the question, "Why are there three sets of readings? And why do they chop up the reading from Luke in that strange way?" I confess that I never once used the texts I or II from Luke without the optional verses on Christmas Eve, and if I'm honest with myself, I'd have to admit that I don't think I would do that even now that I know more. The theological reasons for having those two texts make some intellectual sense to me now, but they don't make narrative sense. And I always used III with the reading from John for Christmas Day. (I didn't ever allow a Christmas Day to pass without celebrating the Eucharist. I just couldn't, even if there were only a half-dozen of us a couple times.)

Here is what I learned when began to ask the question, "Why?" I am much indebted to a Redditor who got me started in the right direction when I asked "why" in the subreddit on the Revised Common Lectionary. He pointed me to an article on a Roman Catholic

website that explained the development of three different Masses for Christmas Day and their different emphases that led to the selection of different readings.

That led me to read several other articles, always on Roman Catholic sites (why don't Episcopalians or other users of the RCL teach this?) that had much the same information, but they varied slightly here and there. I'm going to sum up what I've gleaned from reading all the different accounts of the origin and purpose of each different Mass, but leave aside the history. If you're keen to learn more you have only to Google "origins of the three Christmas Masses" and you'll find plenty of material. I will also append to the very end of this Divergence the material my Reddit helper posted. It's a pretty succinct summary.

The three Christmas Eucharists have three different points of emphasis, and as a result, so do the lections.

I is designed to be celebrated at Midnight, in the first hour of Christmas Day. It emphasizes the "eternal generation" of the Son, the idea that the Son was never *not* born. (To me this has echoes of Nicaea.) This truth was hidden from humankind for ages, and this hiddenness is symbolized in part by the darkness of Midnight. But this truth was not hidden from the angels, and so the First Mass of Christmas was given the name, "The Angels' Mass." It is for this reason that the Gospel text for Christmas I stops with the announcement of the Angels and excludes the journey of the shepherds to Bethlehem to see the baby.

II is traditionally celebrated at dawn of Christmas Day. The coming of the sun, the coming of light symbolize the delivery from darkness that blessed humankind with the arrival in our temporal reality of the eternally generated Son. The revelation of the Christ Child to the shepherds when they arrive at the stable in Bethlehem represents the revelation to us all of the Son and so this Gospel text starts and ends with the story of the shepherds. And this Mass has become known as the "Shepherd's Mass." I'll try to keep that emphasis in focus once I finish this introduction and actually get to writing the Divergence for Christmas II.

III comes to us from a Mass celebrated later on Christmas Day. Sources vary more on the interpretation of its focus, some citing the celebration of the revelation of the Son in the human heart (as opposed to in history, I suppose) others say it is more a meditation on "the Mystery of Christ's Incarnation." This Mass seems to be most commonly called "The King's Mass" but is also called by some "The Mass of the Divine Word." This is the Divergence in which I get to try to deal with that emphasis.

First Reading

Our reading from Isaiah for Christmas III, the service first conceived for Christmas Day (but not dawn) is from Isaiah again, the prophet whose words more fully anticipated the life and ministry of Jesus than did those of any other. This particular text comes from the portion of the book known by many as “Second Isaiah” or “Deutero-Isaiah.” This section comprises the fifteen chapters from 40-54, and appears to have as its intended audience the people of Judah during the latter years of the Babylonian exile. Because of the large temporal and geographic shift from the audience of the earlier chapters (during the time of King Ahaz) most modern scholars attribute this portion of Isaiah to a person or persons writing in the prophet’s name from within the exiled community. This is certainly understandable, but I find it unnecessary. To me it is quite within the realm of reason to believe that a prophet as gifted as Isaiah could have foreseen a situation as dire as that of the exile and have been given words of comfort for the people in such a time.

Regardless, the prophetic impact of our passage for today remains.

As with any text of Scripture, context is important. Taken alone it is too easy to say that the messenger who brings good news brings the Good News we know as the Gospel, but Isaiah appears to have had something else in mind. Here are the verses that immediately precede our text for Christmas III.

Isaiah 52:1–6

Awake, awake,  
    put on your strength, O Zion;  
put on your beautiful garments,  
    O Jerusalem, the holy city;  
for there shall no more come into you  
    the uncircumcised and the unclean.  
Shake yourself from the dust and arise;  
    be seated, O Jerusalem;  
loose the bonds from your neck,  
    O captive daughter of Zion.

For thus says the LORD: “You were sold for nothing, and you shall be redeemed without money.” For thus says the Lord GOD: “My people went down at the first into Egypt to sojourn there, and the Assyrian oppressed them for nothing. Now therefore what have I here,” declares the LORD, “seeing that my people are taken away for nothing? Their rulers wail,” declares the LORD, “and continually all the day my name is despised.

Therefore my people shall know my name. Therefore in that day they shall know that it is I who speak; here I am.” (ESV)

Then follow the words concerning the messenger.

It is worth repeating here the caution I mentioned in Christmas II. In the strictest sense, the prophecy we have here from Isaiah 52 is not “Messianic.” That is, it does not point to the coming of a king in the line of David whose rule will restore the nation. This passage envisions a theocratically ruled Judah, not a Davidic one. God brings the victory and will sit on the throne. This presents no real problem for us who understand Jesus to be God Incarnate (and this is especially fitting, given the Gospel text for Christmas III) but it is good to remember that Isaiah saw things differently.

The effect the prophet desires, that we should sing, even, perhaps especially in the midst of exile, remains a vision for us in this day as well. As citizens of heaven we long for the day that the City of God will be fully revealed and all will dwell in its light, but the call is to sing as though it were already so. As though it were already so because it *is* already so. That is such a difficult truth to hold on to. Even as I type these words I find myself writing with tension in my shoulders that shouts of the struggle to bring about something that already exists, and I can only laugh at myself. (My other reaction is to feel disgust for myself, but I know that impulse comes from the enemy.) I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it too often going forward, I think that one of the reasons that Jesus healed the blind so often is that it is emblematic of our need to be enabled to see the presence of the Kingdom around us and live in the truth of that. Isaiah sings to me, “Be healed, let the scales fall from your eyes and dance!”

## Second Reading

When I was in full time ministry, I almost always used the optional verses in addition to the ones the Lectionary required. This is one of the few cases in which I would not do that. While the added verses have some value to us as students of Scripture, I don’t think they add much in a worship context, and in fact the way they go on and on quoting snippets from the Hebrew Scriptures tends to draw our attention away from the real heart of the earlier verses, “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.”

I have a cat (whose name is Gandalf - yes, he’s grey) who loves nothing better than to come into the bathroom on a cold winter morning when we have the dish heater going and sit with his nose about an inch from the thing, bathing in the heat that pours from it. That is the image I get when I imagine myself staring into the truth of those words from Hebrews. “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his

nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.” I could sit, soaking up the incandescence of those words for hours. Like the song of Colossians, I can just glory in the One I call Lord. And that is something of the emphasis of Christmas III. We can, at least for the moment of worship, let Karl Barth and Augustine worry about parsing every word in the text and just allow the words to sing to us. When the author of the Letter to the Hebrews begins citing text after text after text, the song begins to fade.

But the added texts do tell us something as students of Scripture. The authorship of the Letter to the Hebrews remains shrouded. A great deal of speculation has never yielded anything remotely like a consensus. We can however, glean some things about the letter and its intended audience. It definitely is written to Jewish believers in Jesus. It is from this that the letter derives its name. It was likely written before the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D., as it speaks of the Temple and the Levitical priesthood in the present tense. But here’s an interesting thing. The author doesn’t quote the Hebrew Scriptures from the Hebrew text. That is, even the Greek text here follows the text of the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible known as the Septuagint. This would be evident in the optional verses that I would not use in worship.

What that says to me is that the intended audience is likely Jewish believers from the Diaspora. These would be the Jews scattered throughout the empire, whose knowledge and use of Hebrew would have dwindled over the centuries and whose knowledge of their Scriptures would come from the Septuagint. (Wikipedia has a [good article on the Septuagint](#) and its origins, if you’re interested.) Just exactly how that affects the way I read the text, I’m not entirely sure, but it seems worth keeping in the back of my mind.

Okay, on to the

Gospel Text

“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.”

The “King’s Mass,” or the “Mass of the Divine Word” finds its scriptural climax in those words. The focus of the service is not the coming of light, but the coming of light into the human heart. We have seen. Light enters through the eyes, and His glory takes root in our hearts.

In our third Mass for Christmas Day we hear from the evangelist John, whose Gospel is vastly more different from the other three Gospels than they are from one another. Much biblical scholarship would attribute that to its later provenance. Having been completed later than any of the others it is the product of decades of Christian thought

on the nature of the Jesus, the Son of God. In this thinking, much that Jesus says about Himself, and much that John has to say about Him is not to be taken as from Jesus, but from members of the Johannine community, reflecting on their experience of and reflection on the Risen Christ in their midst.

As with much scholarly opinion on Isaiah, I find this to be an unnecessarily impoverished approach.

Scholars will agree that in some significant ways the Gospel according to John bears the marks of greater historicity than do the “Synoptics.” (The first three Gospels.) For instance, it is far more likely that Jesus’ ministry stretched over the nearly three years that John’s Gospel describes than the one year into which the other three condense it. Then, John (and Mark) probably are probably correct on the chronology of the Last Supper and the trial Crucifixion, placing them all a day sooner in the week, so that the trial and Crucifixion happen on the Day of Preparation, not on the Feast of the Passover. (It is just unimaginable that such a trial and spectacle could have taken place on Passover itself. While this lacks the immediacy of the link between Jesus’ death and the Passover, it benefits from the stronger link between His death and the Day of Preparation, during which thousands of lambs would have been slaughtered in the Temple for the evening’s Seder.)

But here is the reason I ascribe authenticity to the very different image of Jesus we have in John versus that we find in Matthew or Mark or Luke. John’s Gospel is the only one that is derived directly from the remembrances of someone who walked with Jesus, the one John calls “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” John’s Gospel is the product of the greater intimacy with Jesus enjoyed by its primary source. That Jesus said things about Himself in private to those closest to Him that He didn’t say to the crowds whose stories were gathered into the other Gospels is hardly surprising. I owe this insight to my friend Michael Hardin, who, explaining this to me asked, “Jeff, do you speak to your wife the same way that you speak to your congregation?” When I admitted that I did not, the Gospel according to John began to fall into place.

So, when I read the introductory verses of the Gospel according to John, while I don’t necessarily say that the evangelist is quoting Jesus, I am certain that these reflections on the reality that the Word who was God and who was with God is the very same Word who became flesh and dwelt among us, that reflection springs from intimacy with Jesus that I long to have as well. The Holy Spirit makes that intimacy possible, the same intimacy enjoyed by the disciple whom Jesus loved. And where the intimacy blossoms, His fragrance fills me and the space around me.

And that pretty well sums up the point of Christmas III for me.



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Below is the appended explanation of the three different Christmas Masses I received by way of a kind Redditor (a user of the social platform, Reddit) and which set me on this course for the Christmas Lectons.

It is a development in medieval Roman Catholicism. I found the following on a comprehensive Roman Catholic website:

A custom that reaches back to the early centuries of Christianity is the celebration of three Masses on the Feast of the Nativity. It was originally reserved to the pope alone, and did not become universal until the end of the first millennium when the papal books of ceremonies had been adopted by the Frankish Church.

The first Mass originally was connected with the vigil service at the chapel of the manger in the church of St. Mary Major in Rome. There Pope Sixtus III (440) had erected an oratory with a manger, which was considered a faithful replica of the crib at Bethlehem. The pope celebrated the Holy Sacrifice about midnight, in the presence of a small crowd, since the chapel could not hold many people.

The public and official celebration of the feast was held on Christmas Day at the church of St. Peter, where immense crowds attended the pope's Mass and received Communion. This was the third Mass as it appears in today's Missals. Under Pope Gregory VII (1085) the place of this Mass was changed from St. Peter's to St. Mary Major, because that church was nearer to the Lateran Palace (where the popes lived).

In the fifth century, the popes started the custom of visiting at dawn, between these two services, the palace church of the Byzantine governor. There they conducted a service in honor of Saint Anastasia, a highly venerated martyr whose body had been transferred from Constantinople about 465 and rested in this church which bore her name. The whole Byzantine colony in Rome gathered at their church on Christmas Day for this solemn visit of the Holy Father. In later centuries, when the power and prestige of the East Roman Empire waned, the popular devotion of Saint Anastasia declined. The Station in her honor was still kept, however, and has been retained in Missals up to the present day. Instead of the original Mass in honor of Saint Anastasia, another Mass of the Nativity was substituted, in which the saint is now merely commemorated. This is the second one of the three Masses on Christmas Day.

As the texts of the Roman Missal show, the first Mass honors the eternal generation of the Son from the Father, the second celebrates His incarnation and birth into the world,

the third His birth, through love and grace, in the hearts of men. According to the contents of the respective Gospels, people came to call the first Mass "Angels' Mass," the second "Shepherds' Mass," and the third "Mass of the Divine Word."