

**Homily for the Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary,  
December 8, 2017**

**Sung Mass**

**By the Reverend Stephen Gerth**

*Genesis 3:9–15, 20; Psalm 98:1–6; Ephesians 1:3–6, 11–12; Luke 1:26–38*

There are two Christmas stories in the New Testament. There is one by Luke that begins with the annunciation to the Virgin Mary by the angel Gabriel.<sup>1</sup> The other is by Matthew that begins with Joseph having a dream in which an unnamed angel announces to him, “Do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>2</sup> Now in Luke, Gabriel tells Mary what God plans to do—note carefully: he does not ask for her permission or agreement. In Luke, she responds, “Let it be to me according to your word.”<sup>3</sup> But Mary’s response is beside the point. With respect, God decided that Mary would be the mother of Emmanuel.

In an important essay, New Testament scholar Kevin Rowe, professor at Duke Divinity School, argues that in Luke it is correct to understand these words of Elizabeth to Mary in two ways. First, “Why is this

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:26–38.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 1:20.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 1:38.

granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”<sup>4</sup> Second, “Why is this granted me, that the mother of my Yahweh”—my Lord—my God—“should come to me?”<sup>5</sup>

Liturgical scholars Paul Bradshaw and Maxwell Johnson in their book *The Origins of Fests, Fasts and Seasons in Early Christianity*, suggest that Elizabeth’s words may be the earliest record of a prayer to Mary.<sup>6</sup>

In Jerusalem in the year 543, a church was dedicated to Mary. It’s possible that this date was chosen because this event was already being celebrated by Christians there on this date before a basilica was erected.<sup>7</sup> The Feast of Mary’s Conception has been a day of blessing for most Christians ever since. One hundred forty-seven years ago on this day, the first church home of our parish opened at 228 West 45th Street, on the west side of Longacre Square. This church home opened 122 years ago on this day.

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 1:43.

<sup>5</sup> C. Kavin Rowe, “Luke and the Trinity: An Essay in Ecclesial Biblical Theology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 56 (2003), 1–26. See page 14.

<sup>6</sup> Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts and Seasons in Early Christianity* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011), 200.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 211–12.

It was on the eve of this feast at Evensong, many years ago now, that I heard something in Luke that I had never heard before. Luke's genealogy is not appointed to be read at any service in the American Prayer Book. It is also omitted from all of the services in *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*. We read it on the eve of Mary's Conception. It begins with these words, "Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age, being the son (as was supposed) of Joseph, the son of Heli." It continues back in time to "Seth, son of Adam, and Adam, son of God."<sup>8</sup> Luke goes one better than John's prologue where the evangelist declares, "To all . . . who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God."<sup>9</sup> For Luke all people are children of God.

When I was in junior high school—1968, there was a song by a group called the Zombies. I don't remember the name of the song, but it included the words, "What's your name? Who's your daddy?"<sup>10</sup> Saint Luke

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<sup>8</sup> Luke 3:23–38.

<sup>9</sup> John 1:12.

<sup>10</sup> After preaching this homily, I checked online. The song is "Time of the Season," originally a single, later released on the album *Odessey and Oracle* (1968). The spelling mistake on the album's cover has never been corrected.

<http://www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=4097>, (accessed 10 December 2017).

tells us exactly who we are, the daughters and sons of God.

We human beings are still learning what it means to be in relationship with each other and our creator through grace of the one Luke named the other son of God, Jesus.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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