Study Notes for the Sunday Mass Published by Christians for Christ Ministries. We are a non-denominational Christian ministry that seeks to encourage and facilitate Christians in studying the Holy Scriptures. **"For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus."** 1 Timothy 2:5

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 17: 12/28/2025



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week, we open with the first reading from Genesis 21. Next, we look at two readings for the second reading: one from Hebrews and the second from Colossians. Finally, we conclude with the Gospel lesson from Luke.

Introduction to the First Reading:

We have two first readings: one from the Apocrypha and one from the Book of Genesis; we will cover the one from Genesis, chapters 15 and 21.

The context of the reading is God's promise to Abram (later called Abraham) and its fulfillment: the birth of a son. This firstborn son of Sarai (later called Sarah) was the son of promise through whom all of God's blessings would flow. Although God also blessed Abram's first son, born through his servant Hagar, God told Sarai that this son, Ishmael, would be a "wild donkey of a man" (Genesis

16:12). The future Arab nation came through Ishmael, whereas the Hebrew people came through Isaac. The conflict between the two sons and two people groups continued later with the birth of Jacob and Esau as recorded in Genesis 25. Here God told Rebekah (Isaac's wife), "Two nations are in your womb; And two peoples will be separated from your body; And one people shall be stronger than the other; And the older shall serve the younger" (Genesis 25:23). God made promises regarding both the godly line of Isaac / Jacob as well as the carnal line of Ishmael / Esau.

First Reading:

> *1 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great." 2 Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3 And Abram said, "Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir." 4 Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." 5 And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." 6 Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. (Genesis 15:1-6)*

> *1 Then the LORD took note of Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had promised. 2 So Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the appointed time of which God had spoken to him. 3 Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore to him, Isaac. (Genesis 21:1-3)*

In the first passage, we see that Abram was concerned that he did not have an heir. However, God comforted him by telling him he would not remain childless. God promised to give him a son who would eventually start the line of descendants that would outnumber the stars (v. 5). The key verse is "Abraham believed in the Lord, and He reckoned it to him as righteousness" (v. 6). This is an essential point that Paul brings out in the Book of Romans: salvation is by faith and not by works

(Romans 4:3). This story is important to us because it clarifies the foundation of a people saved by faith in God. We are part of Abraham's offspring when we walk by faith, as Abraham is the father of all who believe (Romans 4:16).

In the second passage, we see God's promise to Abram fulfilled, now called Abraham. Sarah bore Isaac in her old age, which was impossible but not too difficult for God. You can imagine how hard it would be to believe God's promises when they seem impossible. But now they experienced the reality of God's blessing through the birth of Isaac, the child of promise. Likewise, God calls us to live by faith and His promises even when it feels like the odds are against us.

Looking back at the introduction, Isaac fulfilled God's will, plan, and timing for Abraham. In contrast, Ishmael was how Abraham tried to fulfill what he thought was God's plan for him, but without obedience to God's timing. As Christians, we will encounter times when we try to fulfill our desires on our own terms and timetable. Some examples of this would be engaging in premarital relations or satisfying our sexual desires by focusing on a person other than our wives or husbands. What does this mean for single people? Singles face a unique challenge, as carnal desires certainly rage against the spiritual ones to focus only upon God, in advance of God delivering a spouse to them or not.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

This week, two passages were given for the second reading; we will cover each. The second reading was from Hebrews chapter 11. Hebrews 11 is known as the "hall of faith," which records the faithful actions of godly men throughout biblical history, beginning with the father of faith, Abraham.

Note: We included the intermediate verses that were skipped in the reading.

Second Reading:

8 By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to

> *receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; 10 for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11 By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore there was born even of one man, and him as good as dead at that, as many descendants AS THE STARS OF HEAVEN IN NUMBER, AND INNUMERABLE AS THE SAND WHICH IS BY THE SEASHORE. 13 All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. 14 For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. 15 And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them. 17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; 18 it was he to whom it was said, "IN ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL BE CALLED." 19 He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type. (Hebrews 11:8-19)*

This passage shows that God has commended Abraham and Sarah for their faith. At the beginning of this chapter, we read, "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Hebrews 11:6). Through these examples, including Abraham, the father of faith, we find inspiration for our own journey of faith in God. Abraham was called out of his land to go to a place God would show him. He didn't have a map of God's plan, but he walked in faith daily, based on what he knew. Then God promised him a son after Sarah was beyond childbearing age. By faith, Abraham believed that God could perform this miracle. As we read earlier, Sarah conceived and gave birth to Isaac. We live as Abraham's children when we walk by faith in God.

The other first reading was from Saint Paul's Letter to the Colossians.

> *12 So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; 13 bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord*

> *forgave you, so also should you. 14 Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. 15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. 17 Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father. 18 Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. 19 Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them. 20 Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord. 21 Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart. (Colossians 3:12-21)*

Looking at the full context of this reading, we must understand that we first "put off" the old man because of who we are in Christ. Paul said in the opening of this chapter, "Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (Colossians 3:1). That is a big "if." This passage depends on having a heart God has changed (John 3:3, born from above). Paul continued, "For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3). After putting off the "old man" and its practices (v. 9), we are to put on the new man, as Paul explains in the reading. Paul culminates the list of things to "put on" by describing love as the anchor for these good character qualities in this passage. He said, "Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity" (v. 14).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from Luke 2. The context is Mary and Joseph's following of God's law to have their newborn son, Jesus, circumcised on the eighth day of His life on earth.

Gospel Reading:

> *22 And when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "EVERY firstborn MALE THAT OPENS THE WOMB*

> *SHALL BE CALLED HOLY TO THE LORD"), 24 and to offer a sacrifice according to what was said in the Law of the Lord, "A PAIR OF TURTLEDOVES OR TWO YOUNG PIGEONS." 25 And there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him. 26 And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. 27 And he came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to carry out for Him the custom of the Law, 28 then he took Him into his arms, and blessed God, and said, 29 "Now Lord, You are releasing Your bond-servant to depart in peace, According to Your word; 30 For my eyes have seen Your salvation, 31 Which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, 32 A LIGHT OF REVELATION TO THE GENTILES, And the glory of Your people Israel." 33 And His father and mother were amazed at the things which were being said about Him. 34 And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary His mother, "Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed– 35 and a sword will pierce even your own soul–to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed." 36 And there was a prophetess, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years and had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 and then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple, serving night and day with fastings and prayers. 38 At that very moment she came up and began giving thanks to God, and continued to speak of Him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. 39 When they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city of Nazareth. 40 The Child continued to grow and become strong, increasing in wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him. (Luke 2:22-40)*

In the opening verses, Mary and Joseph fulfilled the Law's requirement to present a sin offering in the temple 41 days after Jesus' birth. Next, Simeon comes into the story as a man of faith who patiently awaits God's promise through the birth of the Messiah. Four hundred years had passed since God's last revelation, during which the Jews waited for the fulfillment of the promises. This silence was suddenly broken by the miraculous events surrounding the birth of Jesus. This story tells of yet another miraculous outpouring of God's spirit of prophecy through Simeon and Anna. Simeon's prophecy focused on Jesus being God's salvation prepared for all people, both Jews and Gentiles. He also prophesied to Mary about her grief over the Child's destiny. Anna, a prophetess, also verified that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

What do these things mean for us this Christmas season? First, we can be confident that Jesus fulfills God's prophecies concerning the coming Messiah. He is the One who provides salvation to all people. Like Simeon, Anna, Abraham, and Sarah, who waited almost their entire lives to see God's

promises fulfilled, we also need to remember to be patient and wait for God to fulfill His plan in our lives. This means that even when we encounter challenging circumstances, we can still trust that God is working behind the scenes and will finish the good work that He has begun in us (Philippians 1:6). In this Christmas season, if you are having a difficult time finding joy amongst the celebration, you can turn to Jesus, who is the "consolation of Israel" (Luke 2:25).

Reflection Questions

1. In the first reading, we read how Abraham patiently waited for the fulfillment of God's promises. In what ways do you identify with Abraham and Sarah, who waited for the fulfillment of an impossible promise? How does their story of faith give you direction and hope for your faith journey?

2. In the second reading, Paul provides a list of qualities that flow out of being set apart and loved by God that should affect how we live our lives. How does being "holy and beloved" (Colossians 3:12) change how you relate to God, yourself, and others? Re-read the list of character qualities (Colossians 3:12-21) and consider how you express each relationally in your life.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 12-29-2024

Study Notes for the Sunday Mass Published by Christians for Christ Ministries. We are a non-denominational Christian ministry that seeks to encourage and facilitate Christians in studying the Holy Scriptures. **"For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus."** 1 Timothy 2:5



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we look at the readings from First Samuel, then Colossians, and finally the Gospel reading from Saint Luke.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The optional first reading is from the Apocrypha and won't be covered in Mass Notes today. The first reading is from the Book of 1 Samuel. In our day, gender reveal parties have become a popular way for expecting couples to reveal the gender of their baby to family and friends. It is a fun excuse for a party, but the truth is, in our society, most people are thrilled and thankful no matter what the outcome of the medical test showing the gender of the expected baby.

In Old Testament times, If the medical technology had been available, perhaps a gender reveal party would have made more sense because of the great importance among the Hebrew people to have children. Barrenness was seen as a curse and children as a blessing from the Lord. It was an even greater blessing to have a boy because the family name, inheritance, and headship were passed down through the son.

Elkanah, a man who lived during the time of the Old Testament judges, had two wives—Peninnah and Hannah. There was a rivalry between the two, and Peninnah, who had several sons and daughters, would regularly provoke Hannah because she was barren. This caused Hannah great sorrow.

Yearly, Elkanah would go up to the temple in Shiloh to worship the Lord there. On one of these trips, Hannah poured out her sorrow in the form of a prayer and vow to God. She promised that if God would give her a son, she would in turn give him back to the Lord to serve Him all the days of his life. God heard her prayer and gave her a son whom she named Samuel.

In today's reading, we see Hannah fulfilling her vow to God. How hard it must have been for her to relinquish her only son to the Lord. Once the child was weaned, she took him to Eli, the priest at Shiloh, and presented him for service to God. What a great demonstration of faith this was. Sometime later, but while Samuel was still a young boy, God called him to be a prophet in Israel and used him in a powerful way to reveal God's direction and will to God's people. Samuel faithfully spoke the word of the Lord concerning Israel all the days of his life. At God's direction, he anointed David to rule as king over Israel. Eventually, another king would come from the house and line of David who would save His people from their sins and reign in righteousness. This king is Jesus.

First Reading:

1 Samuel 1:20-28 NAS95 20 It came about in due time, after Hannah had conceived, that she gave birth to a son; and she named him Samuel, saying, "Because I have asked him of the LORD." 21 Then the man Elkanah went up with all his household to offer to the LORD the yearly sacrifice and pay his vow. 22 But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, "I will not go up until the child is weaned; then I will bring him, that he may appear before the LORD and stay there forever." 23 Elkanah her husband said to her, "Do what seems best to you. Remain until you have weaned him; only may the LORD confirm His word." So the woman remained and nursed her son until she weaned him. 24 Now when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, with a three-year-old bull and one ephah of flour and a jug of wine, and brought him to the house of the LORD in Shiloh, although the child was young. 25 Then they slaughtered the bull, and brought the boy to Eli. 26 She said, "Oh, my lord! As your soul lives, my lord, I am the woman who stood here beside you, praying to the LORD. 27 "For this boy I prayed, and the LORD has given me my petition which I asked of Him. 28 "So I have also dedicated him to the LORD; as long as he lives he is dedicated to the LORD." And he worshiped the LORD there.

Like Samuel, our children are a gift from God. We don't have to turn them over to full-time service in the church in order to dedicate them to Him. Teach them to serve God whole-heartedly no matter what profession they choose, knowing that God can do much with a man or woman whose heart is fully devoted to Him.

Introduction to the Second Reading

In many of the Apostle Paul's letters, he presents a tragic picture of us in our sinful, fallen state and contrasts us with Christ in his holiness and perfection. In addition, he recounts what God has done for us in His grace, when we deserved only wrath. Once we understand the depth of our sin and the riches of His grace toward us, only then does he ask us to live a life that properly honors God and reflects His glory.

In the book of Colossians, St. Paul tells us that we were enemies of God, alienated from Him and living in spiritual and moral darkness (Col.1:13, 21). Jesus on the other hand, is the perfect image of the invisible God and supreme over all creation (1: 15-18). By His death He rescued us from the dominion of darkness and reconciled us to God, presenting us free from blemish and accusation (1:13, 22). Because of this, St. Paul says we are to live a life displaying His virtues and being thankful.

Second Reading:

Colossians 3:12-21 NAS95 12 So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; 13 bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. 14 Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. 15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. 17 Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father. 18 Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. 19 Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them. 20 Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord. 21 Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart.

To display these virtues, we must cooperate with God's work of transformation. If you read all of Ch. 3, you will notice how this passage is interspersed with action verbs that indicate there is something God wants us to do. Col. 3: 2 tells us to *set* our mind on things above—that is, to think about what we possess in the spiritual realm—salvation from our sin, peace with God, and eternal life, to name a few. Verse 5 tells us to *consider* ourselves deadto evil desires. Verse 9 tells us we are to *put aside* the old self and *put on* the new self. That means to actively put aside old habits and patterns of living associated with our old, sinful self and actively live out the virtues of our new life in Christ by the power of God's Spirit.

In the Second Reading, we are told to *put on* the virtues of compassion, forgiveness, peace, and love. We are to *let* the Word of Christ dwell in our hearts, living its wisdom and teaching its precepts to others. Wives are to *submit* to husbands, husbands are to *love t*heir wives, and children are to *obey* parents. God is transforming us into Christ's likeness and calling us to intentionally live out those virtues for the benefit of others and the glory of God.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Today's reading is from the second chapter of Luke. The first 20 verses of this are some of the most well-known of the New Testament. This is the story of Jesus' birth in a humble stable and the angels' glorious announcement to the shepherds that a Savior has been born.

This Savior was God the Son who took on human flesh and was born as a baby—fully God and fully man. And just like other human babies, Jesus grew from an infant to a boy to a man, increasing in physical stature but also in wisdom and favor with God and men (Luke 2:40, 52). While much of his growth was typical, Jesus also developed in ways that astounded those around Him. Today's reading recounts an occasion when Jesus, as a twelve-year-old boy, amazed the seasoned teachers in the temple with the depth of His understanding of the things of God.

The background is as follows. Jesus had come to Jerusalem in a caravan with his parents to celebrate the Feast of the Passover. A day into the return trip, Mary and Joseph discovered their son was not with them. They quickly returned to Jerusalem, and after an anxious three-day search, found Jesus in the temple, interacting with the Jewish teachers.

Study Notes for the Sunday Mass Published by Christians for Christ Ministries. We are a non-denominational Christian ministry that seeks to encourage and facilitate Christians in studying the Holy Scriptures. **"For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus."** 1 Timothy 2:5

Gospel Reading:

Luke 2:41-52 NAS95 41 Now His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. 42 And when He became twelve, they went up there according to the custom of the Feast; 43 and as they were returning, after spending the full number of days, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. But His parents were unaware of it, 44 but supposed Him to be in the caravan, and went a day's journey; and they began looking for Him among their relatives and acquaintances. 45 When they did not find Him, they returned to Jerusalem looking for Him. 46 Then, after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions. 47 And all who heard Him were amazed at His understanding and His answers. 48 When they saw Him, they were astonished; and His mother said to Him, "Son, why have You treated us this way? Behold, Your father and I have been anxiously looking for You." 49 And He said to them, "Why is it that you were looking for Me? Did you not know that I had to be in My Father's house?" 50 But they did not understand the statement which He had made to them. 51 And He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and He continued in subjection to them; and His mother treasured all these things in her heart. 52 And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

Mothers everywhere can identify with Mary's response to Jesus upon locating Him, which was likely a mixture of relief and consternation: *"Why have you treated us this way? Behold, your father and I have been anxiously looking for you."* Jesus' response must have sounded impudent to those who didn't fully understand who He was. He asked, *"Why is it that you were looking for Me? Did you not know I had to be in My Father's house?* No, Mary didn't know. It seems neither she nor Joseph fully understood the implications of the statement their son had made to them. They didn't understand that Jesus was under the authority of another Father, a Heavenly One, and Jesus would soon follow that Father's will all the way to the cross. All would be revealed in the fullness of time. Until then, Jesus continued to live in subjection to His earthly parents, and Mary treasured all these things in her heart.

Mary tried to make sense out of the events as they unfolded. We, on the other hand, have the whole written record of Jesus in the Bible. We know the rest of His story: He entered into the ministry, performed miracles, claimed to be Son of God, and proclaimed that He was (and is) the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by Him (Gospel of St John 14:6). He purchased our salvation through His death and resurrection, and someday He is coming again to rule and reign in righteousness. This Christmas season we can celebrate our Savior's birth and share the rest of this glorious story with all who come to celebrate with us.

Study Notes for the Sunday Mass Published by Christians for Christ Ministries. We are a non-denominational Christian ministry that seeks to encourage and facilitate Christians in studying the Holy Scriptures. **"For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus."** 1 Timothy 2:5

Reflection Questions

1. What can you do this week to actively put aside old habits and patterns of living associated with your old, sinful self and actively live out the virtues of your new life in Christ by the power of God's Spirit?

2. On Christmas a Savior was born. What can you do to help others around you know Jesus as their Savior?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 12-31-2023



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from Genesis 21. Next, we look at two readings for the second reading, one from Hebrews and the second from Colossians. Finally, we conclude with the Gospel lesson from Luke.

Study Notes for the Sunday Mass Published by Christians for Christ Ministries. We are a non-denominational Christian ministry that seeks to encourage and facilitate Christians in studying the Holy Scriptures. **"For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus."** 1 Timothy 2:5

Introduction to the First Reading:

There are two first readings, either from the Apocrypha or the Book of Genesis, we will cover the one from Genesis. The reading is from Genesis chapters 15 and 21.

The context of the reading is the promise and the fulfillment of the promise of God to Abram (later called Abraham) regarding the birth of a son. This firstborn son of Sarai (later called Sarah) was the son of promise through whom all of God's blessings would flow. Although God has also blessed Abram's first son born through his servant Hagar, God told Sarai that this son Ishmael would be a "wild donkey of a man" (Genesis 16:12). The future Arab nation came through Ishmael, whereas the Hebrew people through Isaac. The conflict between the two sons and two people groups continued later with the birth of Jacob and Esau as recorded in Genesis 25. Here God told Rebekah (Isaac's wife), "Two nations are in your womb; And two peoples will be separated from your body; And one people shall be stronger than the other; And the older shall serve the younger" (Genesis 25:23). God made promises regarding both the godly line of Isaac / Jacob as well as the carnal line of Ishmael / Esau.

First Reading:

> *1 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great." 2 Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3 And Abram said, "Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir." 4 Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." 5 And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." 6 Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. (Genesis 15:1-6)*

> *1 Then the LORD took note of Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had promised. 2 So Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the appointed time of which God had spoken to him. 3 Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore to him, Isaac. (Genesis 21:1-3)*

In the first passage, we see that Abram was concerned that he did not have an heir. However, God comforted him by telling him that he would not remain childless. God promised to give him a son that would eventually start the line of descendants that would outnumber the stars (v. 5). They key verse is "Abraham believed in the Lord, and He reckoned it to him as righteousness" (v. 6). This is an important point that Paul brings out in the Book of Romans that salvation is by faith and not by works (Romans 4:3). This story is important to us because it clarifies the foundation of a person saved by faith in God. We are part of the offspring of Abraham when we walk by faith, as Abraham is the father of all who believe (Romans 4:16).

In the second passage, we see the fulfillment of God's promise made to Abram, now called Abraham. Sarah bore Isaac in her old age, something that was impossible but was not too difficult for God. You can imagine how hard it would be to believe in God's promises when it seems so impossible. But now they experienced the reality of God's blessing through the birth of Isaac, the child of promise. Likewise, God calls us to live by faith and His promises even when the feels the odds are against us.

Looking back at the introduction, Isaac was the fulfillment of God's will, plan and timing for Abraham. In contrast, Ishmael was how Abraham went about what he thought was a way to fulfil God's plan for him but without being obedient to God's timing. As Christians, we will encounter times when we attempt to fulfil our desires but according to the method and timetable that we desire. Some examples of this would be engaging in premarital relations or by satisfying our sexual desires by focusing upon a person other than our wives or husbands. What does this mean for single people? Singles face a unique challenge as the carnal desires certainly rage against the spiritual ones to focus only upon God in advance of God delivering a spouse to them or not.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

There were two passages given this week for the second reading, we will cover each of them. The second of the readings was from Hebrews chapter 11. Hebrews 11 is known as the "hall of faith" in which is recorded the faithful actions of godly men throughout biblical history beginning with the father of faith, Abraham.

Note: We included the intermediate verses that were skipped in the reading.

Second Reading:

> *8 By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; 10 for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11 By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore there was born even of one man, and him as good as dead at that, as many descendants AS THE STARS OF HEAVEN IN NUMBER, AND INNUMERABLE AS THE SAND WHICH IS BY THE SEASHORE. 13 All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. 14 For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. 15 And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them. 17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; 18 it was he to whom it was said, "IN ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL BE CALLED." 19 He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type. (Hebrews 11:8-19)*

We see in this passage how God has commended Abraham and Sarah for their faith. In the beginning of this chapter, we find that "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Hebrews 11:6). With all of these examples including Abraham who is the father of faith, we find inspiration for our own journey of faith in God. Abraham was called out of his own land to go to a place that God would show him. He didn't have a map of God's plan but walked in faith day by day of what he did know. Then God promised him a son after Sarah was beyond the age of childbearing. By faith Abraham believed that God could perform this miracle. As we read earlier, Sarah conceived and gave birth to Isaac. When we walk by faith in God, we are living as Abraham's children.

The other of the first readings was from Saint Paul's Letter to the Colossians.

> *12 So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; 13 bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should*

> *you. 14 Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. 15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. 17 Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father. 18 Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. 19 Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them. 20 Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord. 21 Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart. (Colossians 3:12-21)*

Looking at the full context of this reading, we must understand that we first "put off" the old man because of who we are in Christ. Paul said in the opening of this chapter, "Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (Colossians 3:1). That is a big "if." This passage is conditional upon a having a heart that has been changed by God (John 3:3, born from above). Paul continued, "For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3). After putting off the "old man" with its practices (v. 9), we are to put on the new man, as explained by Paul in the reading. Paul culminates the list of things to "put on" by describing how love is the anchor for these good character qualities that we see in this passage. He said, "Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity" (v. 14).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from the second chapter of Luke. The context is the Mary and Joseph's following of God's law to have their newborn son Jesus circumcised on the eighth day of His life on earth.

Gospel Reading:

> *22 And when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "EVERY firstborn MALE THAT OPENS THE WOMB SHALL BE CALLED HOLY TO THE LORD"), 24 and to offer a sacrifice according to what was said in the Law of the Lord, "A PAIR OF TURTLEDOVES OR TWO YOUNG PIGEONS." 25 And there was a man in Jerusalem*

> *whose name was Simeon; and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him. 26 And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. 27 And he came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to carry out for Him the custom of the Law, 28 then he took Him into his arms, and blessed God, and said, 29 "Now Lord, You are releasing Your bond-servant to depart in peace, According to Your word; 30 For my eyes have seen Your salvation, 31 Which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, 32 A LIGHT OF REVELATION TO THE GENTILES, And the glory of Your people Israel." 33 And His father and mother were amazed at the things which were being said about Him. 34 And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary His mother, "Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed– 35 and a sword will pierce even your own soul–to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed." 36 And there was a prophetess, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years and had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 and then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple, serving night and day with fastings and prayers. 38 At that very moment she came up and began giving thanks to God, and continued to speak of Him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. 39 When they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city of Nazareth. 40 The Child continued to grow and become strong, increasing in wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him. (Luke 2:22-40)*

In the opening verses, Mary and Joseph were fulfilling the requirements of the Law that called them to provide a sin offering in the temple 41 days after the birth of Jesus. Next, Simeon comes into the story as a man of faith that patiently waited for the fulfillment of God's promise through the birth of the Messiah. Four hundred years had passed from the time of God's last revelation during which the Jews waited for the fulfillment of the promises. This time of silence was suddenly broken by the various miraculous events surrounding the birth of Jesus. This story tells of yet another miraculous outpouring of God's spirit of prophecy through Simeon and Anna. Simeon's prophecy focused upon Jesus being God's salvation prepared for all people, both Jews and Gentiles. He also prophesied to Mary about the grief she would bear over the Child's destiny. Anna, who was a prophetess, also verified that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

What do all of these things mean for us during this Christmas season? First, we can be confident that Jesus is the fulfillment of God's prophecies concerning the coming Messiah. He is the One who provides salvation to all people. Like Simeon, Anna, Abraham, and Sarah who waited almost their entire lives to see the fulfillment of God's promises, we too need to remember to be patient and wait for God's fulfillment of His plan in our own lives. This means that even when we encounter extremely difficult circumstances we can still trust that God is working behind the scenes and will finish the good work that He has begun in is (Philippians 1:6). During this Christmas season if you are having a

difficult time finding joy amongst the celebration, you can turn to Jesus who is the "consolation of Israel" (Luke 2:25).

Reflection Questions

1. In the first reading, we read how Abraham patiently waited for the fulfillment of God's promises. In what ways do you identify with Abraham and Sarah who waited for the fulfillment of an impossible promise? How does their story of faith give you direction and hope for your own journey of faith?

2. In the second reading, Paul provides a list of qualities that flow out of being set apart and loved by God that should affect how we live our lives. How does being "holy and beloved" (Colossians 3:12) change how you approach relating to God, yourself, and others? Re-read the list of character qualities (Colossians 3:12-21) and consider how each of them are expressed relationally in your own life.