

**ECHOING GOD’S WORD
IN THE
CATHOLIC COMMUNITY**

Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 18, 2022

Lectionary Readings:

Isaiah 7:10-14	Immanuel: Sign of God’s sovereignty
Psalms 24:1-6	The King of Glory comes.
Romans 1:1-7	Peace with God comes through Christ.
Matthew 1:18-24	Joseph welcomes Mary into his home.

Matthew:

Matthew traces the ancestry of Jesus through Joseph, who was “thought to be the father of Jesus.” Joseph had claimed legal fatherhood over the child when invited to do so by the messenger of God. The story of the birth of Jesus is told from the experience of Joseph, the legal father, and not from the experience of Mary, the birth mother. All this is not surprising since Matthew is writing for a community that values the Jewish traditions and spontaneously thinks in Jewish thought forms. The Jewish-Christian community to whom Matthew addresses his “book” would have found all this very compatible and familiar.

Luke, who will write a “narrative” for a community largely made up of Gentile-Christians, will not use this approach at all. Mark, who writes neither a “book” nor a “narrative” but a “Gospel,” does not even have any birth account or an infancy story

The text does explicitly teach that Jesus was conceived in the womb of a virgin. There is no mention of *perpetual virginity*, as is the faith of the Church, but such a doctrine is not excluded by this wording. Although there had been stories of miraculous births in Hebrew history (Isaac: Genesis 18:11-14; Jacob: Genesis 25:21; Samuel: 1 Samuel 1:4-20), never before had there been the absence of the male role as we find here. In the case of Jesus, the male principle is replaced by the direct act of the Holy Spirit. God will be the father of Jesus Christ; there is no other earthly father, except in the juridical sense (See above). The term *Holy Spirit* does not occur often in the Hebrew Bible. But the *Spirit of God* is always a *creative spirit*. It is creative of human life (Ezekiel 27:1-14; Job 27:3; Isaiah 42:5), and the active agent of creation for the whole universe (Genesis 1:2). But here, the Spirit of God intervenes directly so that this child will be *Son of God*.

Joseph was a *just* man. Joseph is portrayed as *obedient* to God. But his obedience turns on the issue of compassion and love, not on the strict application of what is permitted by the law. He will not see the beloved girl stoned to death for having committed adultery. He will show compassion and protect her and her child from this fate. In this, he becomes even more a true image of the compassionate God who is the father of Jesus Christ. Already, the works of the kingdom of God are being exercised; to go beyond the literal demands of the Law of Moses and to show compassion already announces the beginning of a new covenant arrangement.

Joseph will name the child. In Luke’s Gospel, “they,” Mary and Joseph, will give him the name (Luke 2:21), the name which had been entrusted to Mary (Luke 1:31).

His name will be Jesus. He was named by God. God gave him his identity and his mission. He is of divine origin; it is normal that his identity and mission should also come from God. *Joshua* in Greek is rendered Jesus; *Yeshuah* in Hebrew. Surely, *Yahweh* saves already in the proclamation

that the kingdom has taken root in our midst. More literally, the name means “Yahweh, help!” A perfect cry from our hearts for Advent!

Isaiah:

Matthew will use this word from Isaiah as a word of promise and comfort for the Church of the day and for us today: “A young woman will give birth; her child will bring many blessings.” We know the child to be Christ; the woman to be the Virgin Mary. Isaiah had offered this sign to Ahaz, king of Judah, if only he trusted in the Lord. The kingdom of Judah was being pressured by the king of Ephraim (Israel) and the king of Syria to enter with them into an alliance against the king of Assyria. The prophet suggests that Ahaz not do that but that he trust only in the Lord. It was too much for Ahaz.

Romans:

Paul introduces himself to the Christians at Rome; he validates his right to be called an apostle of Jesus Christ. His message is the same “Good News” that they have already received. He explains how the Jewish Scriptures have been fulfilled in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. The *grace and peace* of the greeting flow, not from Paul himself but from God, as it did in the days of Aaron (Numbers 6:24-26).

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Have you ever experienced the presence and the power of God in your life? How did you know that it was God? Did you find it difficult to communicate this fact to others in a convincing way? Or did you just keep it to yourself? Didn't you feel the need to tell? What are some of the signs that God may be present in any given situation? Remember the old Latin hymn: “*Ubi caritas et amor, ibi Deus est.*” (“Where this love and charity, there God is to be found.”)

2. What evidence have you seen this year that God is still coming to the world with love and compassion in the very midst of wars and destruction and alienation? How have you been able to bring the saving presence of Christ to those around you during this season? Have you been successful in suggesting hope to a person who might otherwise have given up and settled for less; less life; less humanness?

3. Your community (parish, prayer group, family) has a gift to give to the world this year. What are some of the elements of that gift? How can you be part of that gift? Will you be able to extend the spirit of Christmas an extra week, to New Year's Day, and beyond until Epiphany?

SUGGESTION FOR CHRISTIAN ACTION

Choose one way in which you and your group or family might be the embodiment of the *caritas et amor* (charity and love) for one other person during this season. God will be present to that person through your ministry, through your love and caring, even if that person does not recognize it.

PRAYER

Remember, God of mercy, all who struggle, suffer and die to bring forth a world of closer relationships. May your reign of justice, peace, and love come to people of every race and tongue. May the earth be filled with your glory.

CATHOLIC DOCTRINE:

With our annual observance of Advent and Christmas, we find ourselves immersed once again in the Christian experiences of faith that have so marked human history and so affected our personal lives and the world. We ourselves are not at all what we would have been without the coming of Christ. In faith, we know and are committed to the realization that God has intervened in the world with saving power and with blessings unforeseen, blessings that we would not have dared hope for before they were given. Faith helps us see the whole universe with the very insight of God; by faith, we cling to the commitment we have made to Jesus Christ through whose birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection, we have access to eternal salvation.

Religious faith comes from God as a gift. Jesus tells Peter that the insight by which he could proclaim that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God had come to him not from human sources but from the Heavenly Father (Matthew 16:17). The evidence for believing religiously does not rest on human persuasion but on the very authority of God. Surely, what we believe is not contrary to human reason. In fact, the elements of our faith statements are supremely in harmony with human reason. But they are not derived from the logic of human reasoning as are mathematical conclusions or scientific knowledge. We believe because God stands by what we believe. We believe because God's authority stands behind what we adhere to. Religious faith is also a human act that flows from the free choices that we make as human beings. Although motivated by the grace that comes to us from God, acts of faith are truly human acts, originating in our willingness to believe and to trust. The human will puts out the commitment to believe and to trust. God does not force our acts of faith. They are freely chosen by us.

I have a choice: whether or not I want to attribute to God the good things I see around me. If I choose to interpret the reality of my life with its events and its occurrences as being related to God, then I hold to a religious or faith-based interpretation of that reality. If I choose a merely secular interpretation of that same reality, then I hold to a secular view of that reality. In a certain sense, a secular interpretation is itself a kind of "faith," in the sense that it is a freely chosen interpretation of reality. In this case, it is a "non-God" kind of stance, but it is, nonetheless, an interpretation.

(See: The Catechism #153-165)

© 2017 Rev. Clement D. Thibodeau. All rights reserved.