

## FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 22, 2019 A

**Facilitator:** *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

**Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.**

**Opening prayer:** *Father, all-powerful God, your eternal Word took flesh on earth when the Virgin Mary placed her life at the service of your plan. Lift our minds in watchful hope to hear the voice which announces his glory, and to open our minds to receive the Spirit who prepares us for his coming. Amen.*

**Response to last week's Word:** [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

**Facilitator:** All three readings point to the *identity* of Jesus as the sign of God's presence with his people (first reading), as true God and true man, (second reading), and as the Son of God who has come to save us (Gospel).

*Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.*

Read the first reading, the psalm and the second reading, pausing briefly after each one.

### FIRST READING: Isaiah 7:10-14

King Ahaz finds himself in a bad place. He is about to be attacked by neighboring armies. To defend his kingdom, he plans to enter into an alliance with pagan rulers. Isaiah, the local prophet, tells him that such an action shows distrust in God with whom his people have a covenant relationship.

Isaiah tells Ahaz to ask God for a sign so that God can show him that he is with him. Feigning humility, Ahaz says he will not tempt the Lord.

Even though Ahaz refuses to ask God for a sign, Isaiah says that God will give a sign: "The virgin will conceive a child and give him the name Emmanuel (God-with-us)." The birth of the child is very important because it means that the Davidic dynasty will continue and not be wiped out by hostile neighbors.

While Isaiah is most likely referring to the soon-to-be-born son of Ahaz (Hezekiah), early Christians see the Isaian prophecy as pointing to Jesus. In biblical interpretations, this is called the "deeper or fuller meaning" of a text, i.e., a meaning intended by God but not clearly envisaged by the human author and which, after further research and careful study, comes to light as revelation.

### RESPONSORIAL PSALM 24

This psalm is a hymn of praise to God, the Creator and Savior. There is a reference to cultic worthiness: only the person with a clean heart and upright conscience can participate in the worship of the Lord.

### SECOND READING: Romans 1:1-7

As Paul begins his letter to the Romans, he reminds them that Jesus is both *human* and *divine*. Jesus is "descended

from David according to the flesh, but established as the Son of God in power according to the Spirit." Paul also reminds his readers of the 'obedient faith' or call to holiness to which all disciples of Jesus are summoned.

### PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: Matthew 1:18-24

*As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.*

**A participant reads the Gospel,  
then all pause to reflect.**

*As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.*

### GOSPEL: Matthew 1:18-24

In *Matthew's* infancy narrative, Joseph—not Mary—receives the limelight. This is because Matthew is writing for a *Jewish* audience and he wants to show them that Jesus is a true descendant of Abraham and David. Joseph is Jesus' link to the house of David. While not ignoring Jesus' divine origin, Matthew wants to show that even though Jesus does not have a human father, he is the son of David. Jesus' divinity emanates from his virginal conception by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Matthew wishes to portray Joseph as a 'righteous man,' a law-abiding person who blends submission to the law with compassion for others. He tells us that Joseph intended to divorce Mary, as not to do so would be to tolerate evil in their midst (the assumption here is, of course, that Mary had committed fornication). By being willing to divorce Mary, Joseph shows that he loves God more than Mary whom he also loves with all his heart. But Jo-

seph plans to divorce Mary “quietly” so as not to humiliate her. If Joseph had gone public, Mary could have been stoned to death for her presumed infidelity (see Deut 22:21). This shows that Joseph’s sense of justice is tempered with mercy.

But God intervenes. An angel tells Joseph in a dream to take Mary into his home because the baby has been conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph obeys. (He practices what the Catechism calls “obedient faith” (art 144). The neighbors may be shocked. After all, they do not know the circumstances of Jesus’ conception. Here again, Joseph shows himself to be a righteous man, obedient to God’s revelation regardless of what others might think.

By giving Jesus two names, Matthew reveals Jesus’ *identity* and *mission*. His name means “One who saves” and his mission is to bring salvation. Jesus is also called *Emmanuel*, i.e., “God is with us.” In Jesus, God is with us in the flesh. For Matthew, the birth of Jesus is the fruition of God’s promise through the ages to *be with* and to *save* his people.

In quoting the Isaian passage, Matthew is telling his audience that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah. He comes from *God* and from *Israel*.

## FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Turn to the person next to you and share what word/s or image/s in the readings caught your attention? Did they comfort or challenge you or touch you in some way?

*The facilitator can decide which is more helpful: to share the next questions with the whole group, or to share in smaller groups of three or four.*

2. In the first reading, Ahaz is in a difficult situation as he is accused of not trusting in God. Can you think of a time when you found it hard to trust God, to believe that a particular situation would turn out okay? What helped you to cope with such a situation?

3. In the second reading, Paul speaks about ‘obedient faith’ and our ‘call to holiness.’ What do these important phrases mean to you? What do they ask of you?

4. Joseph never speaks in the Bible. How does his silent witness speak to you?

5. In the Gospel, the angel tells Joseph not to be afraid to take Mary into his home. Is Marian devotion a part of your spirituality? If it is, how does it find expression in your life? If not, what makes you reluctant to take Mary into your heart?

6. Name one thing today’s Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

## RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week’s readings. Suggestions: Think and pray about your call to trust God in all things, your call to a life of “obedient faith,” and your call to live a holy life. Look for ways to be holy by reaching out to someone who is alone and lonely this season.

**JOURNALING.** *Having listened to God’s Word and listened to others’ reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.*

## PRAYING WITH THE WORD

**FACILITATOR:** Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: “*Loving God, you placed before us the wonderful witness of St. Joseph, a man who listened to, discerned and acted on your Word to him. Help me to grow in my desire and ability to hear discernment and obey your Word.*”

## CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

**Facilitator:** Let us now conclude with prayers of thanksgiving, petition and intercession. What are we grateful for? For what and for whom do we wish to pray?

## CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Emmanuel, you have come into our world  
through people like Mary, Joseph, and Paul,  
and have made God’s presence known  
through prophets like Isaiah.  
Make my life a sign of the power of your love  
that invites others to faith and trust that  
God is with us still.  
Amen.*

***A Blessed Christmas to all of you!***

Fr. Eamon – [tobin2@live.com](mailto:tobin2@live.com)

**SCC Annual Day of Reflection: We Are Mission!**  
**January 25, 2020, 8:00am – 3:00pm**  
**Presented by**  
**Fr. Blake Britton & Dr. Carol Razza**  
**St. John the Evangelist Parish, Viera, FL**  
**Info and \$12 Tickets at [sccspacecoast@gmail.com](mailto:sccspacecoast@gmail.com)**