

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah = I-ZAY-uh

Ahaz = AY-haz

The tone of this reading is prophetic. It has a solemn, imaginative quality.

Note the repetition of "weary," which you can emphasize, slightly.

The reading concludes with a prophecy. Proclaim it in a solemn and straightforward voice.

Emmanuel = ee-MAN-yoo-el

For meditation and context:

READING I

The story of Ahaz is situated in an eighth-century BC political conflict. As king of Judah, Ahaz needs to make a critical choice whether or not to submit to Assyria and be counted among one of its territories or to join an alliance with the northern tribe of Israel. With the help of Isaiah's prompting, Ahaz makes the decision to rely on the help of God and to act independently of Israel, since Isaiah prophesies that this will lead to destruction.

Isaiah is once again at work with Ahaz as we enter into today's reading. Ahaz has another difficult decision to make: to ask God for a sign of his providence or not. Isaiah suggests that if Ahaz asks for a sign that God is supporting him that it could come in the form of something truly spectacular; it could be something deep within the sea or something as lofty as the skies. Ahaz should not be hesitant to ask for such a sign. However, Ahaz has made up his mind that he will not ask God to provide a sign.

Nevertheless, despite the king's trust in God, Isaiah knows the heart of the people, who yearn for God to prove himself to be providential. Thus, he informs the kingdom of Judah that it will be given a sign, and the sign is to be a virgin giving birth to a son who is to be named "Emmanuel." This name itself, meaning "God-with-us," suggests that God will continue to be with his people. Because this prophecy has been made to the house of David, it takes on a messianic nature that is linked with the Davidic kingdom found in 2 Samuel 7:2-16.

LECTIONARY #10

READING I Isaiah 7:10-14

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah

The LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying:

Ask for a sign from the LORD, your GOD;
let it be deep as the netherworld, or high as the sky!

But Ahaz answered,

"I will not ask! I will not tempt the LORD!"

Then Isaiah said:

Listen, O house of David!

Is it not enough for you to weary people,
must you also weary my God?

Therefore the Lord himself will give you this sign:
the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son,
and shall name him Emmanuel.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Psalm 24:1-2, 3-4, 5-6 (7c, 10b)

R. Let the Lord enter; he is king of glory.

The LORD's are the earth and its fullness;
the world and those who dwell in it.
For he founded it upon the seas
and established it upon the rivers.

Who can ascend the mountain of the LORD?
or who may stand in his holy place?
One whose hands are sinless, whose heart
is clean,
who desires not what is vain.

He shall receive a blessing from the LORD,
a reward from God his savior.
Such is the race that seeks for him,
that seeks the face of the God of Jacob.

The tone of this reading, which begins Paul's letter to the Romans, is unusual. It's a list of qualifications, almost like a spiritual resume.

Emphasis on "Through him."

Even emphasis on "among whom are you also," with slight added emphasis to "also."

READING II Romans 1:1-7

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans

Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus,
called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God,
which he promised previously through his prophets in the
holy Scriptures,
the gospel about his Son, descended from David according
to the flesh,
but established as Son of God in power
according to the Spirit of holiness
through resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our LORD.
Through him we have received the grace of apostleship,
to bring about the obedience of faith,
for the sake of his name, among all the Gentiles,
among whom are you also, who are called to belong
to Jesus Christ;
to all the beloved of God in Rome, called to be holy.
Grace to you and peace from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ.

READING II

Paul opens his letter to the Romans with a summary statement of the incarnation of the Son of God that proceeds through to his lordship as the resurrected Christ. In his greeting, Paul does not simply introduce himself by name, but he provides several indicators of his authority. First, Paul identifies himself as "a slave of Christ Jesus." This does not mean that Paul is held captive against his own will but rather that he has committed himself totally to Christ. Second, Paul refers to himself as an "apostle," an eyewitness to the Lord's resurrection. Finally, like the

prophets of old, Paul has been "set apart" for the task of preaching the Gospel. Paul's audience would be foolish to reject his authority.

After Paul gives witness to the authority of Christ, namely that he was born of the flesh according to the line of David but is to be named the "Son of God," being born of the Spirit, Paul proceeds to extend his mission to those who are receiving his letter. Paul tells the Romans that they too "have received the grace of apostleship." Although they have never seen the resurrected Christ in bodily form, their authority

comes from "the obedience of faith." It is this faith that allows the Romans to "belong to Jesus Christ" and to share in the mission "to be holy." In these few lines, Paul has clearly opened the way for his challenging word to be heard among the Christians at Rome. While he blesses them with the gifts of "grace" and "peace," he will likewise challenge the community to establish unity among Gentile and Jewish members. He writes to a community he calls "the beloved of God," the holy ones of Rome; surely they feel a summons to live up to their name.

The rich tone of this familiar story is mysterious. "This" is the word that initiates the mystery.

The word "behold" initiates the angelic vision of the reading.

Emphasis on "all this."

Here, "Behold" reinforces the scriptural vision of the events depicted.

Emmanuel = ee-MAN-yoo-el

GOSPEL Matthew 1:18–24

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew

This is how the **birth** of **Jesus Christ** came about.

When his mother **Mary** was **betrothed** to **Joseph**,

but **before** they **lived** together,

she was **found** with **child** through the **Holy Spirit**.

Joseph her **husband**, since he was a **righteous man**,

yet **unwilling** to **expose** her to **shame**,

decided to **divorce** her **quietly**.

Such was his **intention** when, **behold**,

the **angel** of the **Lord** **appeared** to him in a **dream** and said,

"**Joseph**, son of **David**,

do not be **afraid** to take **Mary** your **wife** into your **home**.

For it is through the **Holy Spirit**

that this **child** has been **conceived** in her.

She will bear a **son** and you are to name him **Jesus**,

because he will save his **people** from their **sins**."

All this took **place** to **fulfill** what the **Lord** had **said** through

the **prophet**:

***Behold**, the **virgin** shall **conceive** and bear a **son**,*

*and they shall **name** him **Emmanuel**,*

which means "**God** is **with** us."

When **Joseph** **awoke**,

he did as the **angel** of the **Lord** had **commanded** him

and took his **wife** into his **home**.

GOSPEL

Matthew has just finishing detailing the lineage from which Jesus flows, the impressive genealogy that ends with the proclamation that Jesus is called the "Christ." Now Matthew continues his theological examination of the incarnation by demonstrating how Jesus is both Son of God and son of Mary.

At the outset of the reading is the conflict that originates from Mary both being betrothed to Joseph and found to be pregnant. However, unlike those who discovered Mary's pregnancy, we are told of its divine origins, namely that this pregnancy

came about "through the Holy Spirit." Nevertheless, we are meant to struggle with the potential outcome of this serious charge. Although Joseph and Mary were betrothed, they were not married; therefore this offense could be punished by death. Joseph's decision to quietly divorce her demonstrates his concern to protect Mary from the law. However, his mind is changed when careful discernment of a dream leads him to take Mary as his wife and to bring her into the protection of his home. He must have recognized that God would keep them from all harm.

The passage ends with a bit of commentary from Matthew. He tells us that this encounter between the angel and Joseph was meant to allow for the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy that a virgin shall give birth to a son and that he will be named "Emmanuel." The beginning of Matthew's Gospel is clearly meant to impress upon his audience that through the bloodline of David and through the obedient listening of one of its own, Joseph, God would be with his people. S.W.