

4th Sunday of Advent – A

As a child, by the time the 4th Sunday of Advent rolled around, I was ready to be done with Advent and just get on to Christmas. But even though the 4th week of Advent usually just has a couple days, the Church says we still need a little more time to reflect and prepare for the coming feast. And this week, the attention of our readings shifts from John the Baptist, who heralded the coming of the Lord, to St. Joseph, who became Jesus's foster father.

As we heard in our Gospel reading, St. Joseph was betrothed to Mary, but then learned she was expecting a child. Betrothal in the Jewish culture of the time is not the equivalent of our modern-day engagement period. The betrothal period was rather the first part of a two-part marriage process in Judaism. At the betrothal, the bride and groom would come together before witnesses and

state their consent, which nowadays happens during the wedding ceremony itself. Although they were considered legally married at that point, they still did not live with each other yet. Instead, the bride would continue to live with her parents for up to a year, when the second part of the marriage would then take place: the bride would go in a procession to the groom's house, and they would begin living together, and the marriage would then be consummated.

In his Gospel, Matthew makes it clear that when Joseph learns that Mary is expecting a baby, they are betrothed, that is, legally married, but not yet living together. According to Jewish law, this would make Mary unfit for marriage and Joseph should divorce her. This normally involved a public trial and Mary would have been publicly shamed. But Joseph, being a righteous man as Matthew tells us, chooses not to subject Mary to this and instead decides to divorce her quietly. That is of course when an angel of

the Lord visits him. Now it is Joseph's turn to receive the good news of the coming of the Messiah: the angel tells him that Mary has conceived a child through the power of the Holy Spirit. He instructs Joseph to take Mary into his home, and to name the child Jesus.

Our Gospel reading today includes three different names and titles for the child who is about to be born. Each of these three names or titles tells us something important about who Jesus is. The reading begins with the declaration from Matthew the evangelist: "This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about." The word "Christ" is a title given to Jesus. It means the same thing as the word "Messiah"; Christ is the Greek word; Messiah is the Hebrew word, both having the same meaning: "anointed one". Well what does that mean, perhaps you ask. "Anointed one" is a title signifying one who has been chosen by God for a special role. And this is not just any old special role by the way, but rather a role

that has to do with establishing the kingdom of God. For the Jewish people and throughout the time of the Old Testament including up to the time when Jesus was born, it was believed that the Messiah or the Christ – the anointed one of God – would establish the kingdom of God by reuniting the twelve tribes of Israel, by restoring Israel to its former greatness, and by subjugating all other nations to Israel.

However, there are two more names given to the child Mary is expecting which reveal more clearly who this Messiah will be. The angel who appears to Joseph tells him not to divorce Mary but to take her into his home, and to give him the name Jesus. To name a child was understood as to claim the child for one's own. In doing so, Joseph then would accept this child, conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, as his own, and would accept the responsibility of raising and caring for him. And the name Jesus is not just chosen at random; the angel doesn't tell Joseph to give him that name

because he likes the way it sounds. No, the name Jesus means something which tells us more about the Messiah. Jesus is a variation of the name Joshua, a Hebrew name meaning “The Lord saves” or “the Lord is salvation”. The angel tells Joseph that he is to name the child Jesus specifically “because he will save people from their sins.”

So the Messiah sent by the Lord is not coming to establish a political kingdom on earth and to overthrow the Romans, Israel’s political enemies of that era, but rather to establish a heavenly kingdom and to overthrow humanity’s true enemy: the powers of sin and darkness. Which is the greater enemy – the Romans or the powers of sin and darkness? Clearly it is the latter, because even though the Romans could and did bring about great human misery in Israel, the power of sin enslaves not just the body but also the soul, with eternal consequences. In other words, while the Romans could kill the body, the powers of sin and darkness can kill the

soul. And so it is they who will be overthrown by the Messiah, by Jesus.

And note that the angel does not say that Jesus will save people from the consequences of their sins: we still have to live with those, at least in this life. Even though God forgives our sins, we usually still have to live with their consequences. For example, if we have betrayed someone's trust through word or deed, but later repent of this sin, God will indeed forgive us. However, we will still have to earn back the trust of the person we have betrayed – that is the consequence of our sin. Saving us from our sins is even greater than saving us from the consequences of our sins. God doesn't want to just cover up our sins, to pretend that they never happened: he wants to cleanse us of our sins and of the negative effects they have on our souls and on our relationship with Him. He wants to purify us completely, so that our will and our desires are completely aligned with His.

Matthew then tells us that all this has taken place to fulfill a prophecy, one going back over 700 years to the time of Isaiah the prophet and Ahaz, one of the corrupt kings of Judah, which we heard in our first reading. Here's the prophecy: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which as Matthew then tells us, means "God is with us." Emmanuel is the third name or title given to Jesus in this Gospel, and it reveals to us yet more about who Jesus is. In Jesus, God is coming into the world to be with us. He is not some distant god but rather one who loves us so much that he wants to destroy anything that will keep us from Him. He wants to be with us, spiritually and even physically. Jesus was not a spirit roaming about the earth but rather real flesh and blood, a real human being – and yet also God. And he has dwelt with humanity ever since: even after he ascended body and soul into heaven, he has remained present to us in multiple ways: in prayer, in his Church, in his

Word, when Christians come together to pray and to celebrate the sacraments, and most especially in the Eucharist. Truly Jesus is Emmanuel; truly God is with us.

So important is this idea that God is with us, that Matthew essentially begins and ends his Gospel with it. He reminds us of the name Emmanuel, meaning God is with us, at the beginning, and at the very end of the Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples, “Behold, I am with you always, even until the end of the age.” This is what we celebrate today and in a few days on Christmas: that God has come to dwell with us, and He is always with us.

- **December 21, 2025 at St. Mary's, Spring Lake**