

December 18, 2022  
4th Sunday of Advent  
Matthew 1:18-24

Now 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 be with child 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.

### **Background:**

Joseph is the central figure in the story as Matthew's gospel presents the birth of Jesus. It is he who is described as a righteous man, whom the angel appears to in a dream, who first receives the news that Mary his spouse is with a highly favored male child whom he is to name, and that this child will be the fulfillment of all that the prophets had spoken of. Matthew's focus on Joseph is a significant departure from what most are accustomed to.

Everyday life in Matthew's community was gender-separated, even for those who were married. Marriages were arranged and negotiated by the women, and then confirmed by the patriarch to make sure that the agreement was fair for both families. The primary concern was the economic and political influence that the two families would gain through the marriage. When all was in place, the marriage was announced and the period of betrothal began. The bride prepared to leave the house of her father, and the groom prepared a place for his bride in the house of his father. Unlike contemporary engagement, although the couple did not live together, they were considered married during the betrothal. If one should die, the other was considered a widow or widower. Engaging in sexual relationships outside of the relationship was considered adultery. Betrothal was the beginning of the marriage process that ended with the groom taking the bride into his house and consummating their marriage.

In the text, Joseph is described as a righteous man. Matthew's community knew this meant that he faithfully observed the law of Abraham. According to Deuteronomy, Joseph should have had Mary stoned, because if the child did not belong to Joseph, the pregnancy must have been the result of her having committed adultery with another.

"If within the city a man comes upon a maiden who is betrothed, and has relations with her, you shall bring them both out to the gate of the city and there stone them to death: the girl because she did not cry out for help though she was in the city, and the man because he violated his neighbor's wife. Thus shall you purge the evil from your midst." (Deut 22:23-24)

Even though Joseph has taken great pains to be faithful to the law, he is also a man of compassion and decides to divorce Mary quietly. Perhaps this is so the true father of the child can come forward and claim the child as his heir. It is at this point that an angel appears to Joseph and he learns that Mary's pregnancy is due to the intervention of the Holy Spirit, that the child is a highly favored male, and that he, Joseph, is to name him Jesus.

Totally changing one's course of action because of a dream may be odd in the contemporary world. However, ordinary people of the day believed that God spoke to them in ordinary ways. Dreams were considered an ordinary part of each person's life and awareness. As a result of his dream, Joseph took Mary into his house as

his wife and gave the child the name Jesus as he had been directed, and he claimed him as his own son. Those are the obvious events in how Mary came to become Joseph's wife and Jesus his apparent son.

Because of the many Church feasts associated with Mary, the Church has given us many opportunities to reflect on Mary's surrender and her role in God's plan. Matthew in this gospel places Joseph as the central figure in God's plan to come among us as the incarnate presence of God. Joseph also gave up his own dreams, his plans, and his hopes to create his own family, name his own son, and have his own offspring to carry on his family line. Instead, he accepted God's plan. He accepted God's family and made it his own. It is one thing to have faith that God is working in this very unique situation, but it is another to surrender one's own desire and plans for one's own life in order to cooperate with what God is doing. This can be even more difficult when one has lived his life trying to be faithful to the law and the path to living a lifetime relationship with God's desire. Sometimes Joseph is dismissed as the foster father of Jesus, who passes quickly from notice in the gospels and our own reflection. The Church, by placing this gospel text on the last Sunday in the Advent season, is inviting us to reflect on Joseph as a model for our own preparation for Christmas, and also for how we are preparing for the second coming and the fullest presence of God.

### **Reflection Questions:**

1. Where have you seen the hand of God's presence in your life and in the world during this past week or month?
2. Are there places where God has been present in subtle ways that may not have gotten the notice they deserve because they were subtle, or perhaps you were looking for a more significant sign of God's presence?
3. What are some of the accomplishments that have helped shape your understanding of yourself?
4. Have you ever changed the direction of your life because of some experience of God's presence?
5. The gospel describes Joseph as a person who lived his life trying to be faithful to the law of Abraham. Do you know people who live their life trying to be faithful Catholics, Christians, Jews, and Muslims?
6. Can you imagine any of them putting aside what they believed the law required, in order to act in the way that Joseph does toward Mary in this gospel?
7. What kind of soul-searching do you think Joseph did before he made his decision to accept Mary as his wife and Jesus as his son?
8. Could this text, revealing how God chose to come into our world at the birth of Jesus, also be an indication of how God desires to break into our world today?
9. Can you take some time now to talk with God about your impression of Joseph from this gospel and what it is saying to you at this point in your own life?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to [annemarie.lom@gmail.com](mailto:annemarie.lom@gmail.com)

Our Gospel Reflections are hosted by the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity. Their homepage is <https://fscclalledtobe.org/>. One link there is labeled Franciscan Gospel Reflections. A click on the icon will take you to the Gospel reflections for the upcoming Sunday. By following this link, you will be able to blog or comment on the reflection questions. The material will be posted on Fridays and will be available until the following Friday when the new material is posted.

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## Excerpts from the readings for December 18, 2022, the Fourth Sunday of Advent

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.

*Let the Lord enter; he is king of glory.  
The Lord's are the earth and its fullness 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 the face of the God of Jacob.*

Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle for the gospel of God, which he promised through his prophets, the gospel about his Son, descended from David, but established as Son of God in power according to the Spirit through resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Through him we have received the grace of apostleship, to bring about 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.

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about.  
When Mary was betrothed to Joseph, she was found with child through the Holy Spirit. Joseph, since he was unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly. Such was his intention when the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "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 had commanded him and took his wife into his home.

### Excerpts from Isaiah 7:10-14; Psalm 24:1-6; Romans 1:1-7; and Matthew 1:18-24

#### From Joe:

Friends,

Here are the gospel background and reflection questions for December 18th, as prepared by Franciscan spiritual director Fr. Paul Gallagher. The gospel is from the first chapter of Matthew; it follows right after the first 17 verses of genealogy. It is the story of how the birth of Jesus came about, from Joseph's perspective. Mostly, it relates and then interprets what an angel told Joseph in a dream. His betrothed Mary was found to be with child, and he was going to divorce her quietly. The angel told him, "Take Mary into your home. This child has been conceived through the Holy Spirit. Mary will bear a son; you are to name him Jesus. He will save his people from their sins." This fulfills what the Lord said through Isaiah: "The virgin shall bear a son; they shall

name him Emmanuel," which means "God is with us." Joseph did as the angel of the Lord had commanded, and took his wife into his home.

The other readings also have references to the coming of this Savior from God and from the line of David, and of the prophet foretelling it. The first reading from Isaiah includes the passage that is quoted by Matthew in the gospel: "Listen, house of David! The Lord himself will give you this sign: The virgin shall bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel." Psalm 24 exclaims, "Who may stand in the Lord's holy place? One whose hands are sinless. He shall receive a blessing from the Lord. Such is the race that seeks the God of Jacob." In the second reading, from the letter to the Romans, Paul writes, "God promised previously, through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the Gospel about his Son, descended from David, established as Son of God, according to the Spirit of holiness through resurrection from the dead."

Joe

> i < May the Word light your way each day!