

4th Sunday of Advent

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 7:10–14
<i>Response</i>	Let the Lord enter; he is king of glory
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 24:1–2, 3–4, 5–6
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 1:1–7
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	The virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel. –Matthew 1:23
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 1:18–24

Now with the Fourth Sunday of Advent, the Church shifts gears once again. As we saw in the last two Sundays, we were focused on preparing for the coming of Christ, preparing for the first advent of Jesus through the figure of St. John the Baptist. Now with the Fourth Sunday of Advent, we actually move to the Gospel Annunciation of the birth of Christ himself, and because we are in year A, this is going to be the account of the birth of Jesus Christ, his virginal conception and birth through the Virgin Mary, in the Gospel of Matthew. So as usual, we will read the Gospel first, we will ask a few questions, and then we will unpack the answers using the Old Testament, the Psalm and the living tradition. Matthew 1:18–24 says this:

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel” (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife.¹

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Okay, so let's break this passage down and look at a few key points here of significance. Number one, notice the context here. Matthew is describing the birth of Christ and he says that "when his mother Mary had been betrothed, but before Joseph and her had come together" (Matt 1:18). What would that have meant in a first century Jewish context? Well, Matthew is referring here to the two-stage process of marriage that ancient Jews practice. So in an ancient Jewish setting, a man and a woman would become legally married through an act of betrothal. It's different than an engagement in our time. Sometimes people say that Mary and Joseph were engaged. They weren't engaged; betrothal was legal entry into a covenant marriage. So once a person is betrothed to someone else, they are husband and wife. However, they don't consummate the marriage until the two of them move in with one another. As I point out—I have a book, *Jesus the Bridegroom*,² where I go into this in a little more detail—it was customary that after the betrothal, the bridegroom would go and prepare a home in order to bring his bride into his home. St. Joseph, being a carpenter, could've obviously done this. So he would go off and build a home and then what we would call the wedding ceremony would actually take place over the course of seven days and it would culminate in the procession of the bride into the home of the bridegroom. And then the marriage would be consummated. So the image here is of Mary and Joseph being married but not yet living together in the same home, not yet having celebrated the final wedding ceremony with its consummation.

And that's why, point 2, when Mary becomes pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit, Joseph is alarmed, Joseph is perplexed at what to do because he has not yet taken Mary into his home. So, what's being emphasized by Matthew here at this point is, then of course, the virginal conception of Jesus, that Jesus is conceived in the womb of Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. And so when St. Joseph decides to send her away—literally in the Greek *to divorce her, to put her away*—the angel appears to him and says "don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife"—meaning take her into your home—"for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 1:20). So we have a clear affirmation there of the virginal conception. Now notice what it says here, "she will bear a son, and you will call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:21). What does that mean? Well in the original Aramaic tongue—which was probably spoken by most Jews at time of Jesus' birth—the name for Jesus is Yeshua, and it means in Aramaic *God saves*, or more properly *the Lord saves*. So, there is kind of a pun

² Brant Pitre, *Jesus the Bridegroom: The Greatest Love Story Ever Told* (New York: Image, 2014).

here in the Angel's proclamation. She will call his name *the Lord saves* because he will save his people from their sins. So we are already getting a revelation of the virginal conception of Jesus and the meaning of his name, revealing his identity as the savior.

The third and final aspect of this text that is the most important in some ways, is the fact that Matthew highlights that the virginal conception of Jesus, this miraculous conception, this unprecedented conception, is in fact a fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies. And once again, Isaiah stands front and center. So he goes back to Isaiah 7:14, this prophecy of a virgin who shall conceive and bear a son, and whose name shall be called Emmanuel, which means *God with us* or *God is with us*. There again we see the significance of the name. So Isaiah 7:14—you won't be surprised to note—is in fact the first reading for this Sunday. So in order to understand why Matthew points this reading it is actually helpful for us to go back and look at the text in context.

So if you turn back to the book of Isaiah 7:14, we will put that verse in context with the first reading by looking at verses 10–14. Now a little caveat before we read the passage. What I'm about to read is one of the most controversial and debated passages in the Old Testament. As we've just seen, St. Matthew takes this text and interprets it as a prophecy of the literal virginal conception of Jesus by an actual virgin, namely the Virgin Mary. So let's go back to the Old Testament reading and see what passage Matthew was alluding to in the book of Isaiah and try to put it in context. So if we turn back to the book of Isaiah 7:10–14, this is the first reading for this Fourth Sunday of Advent. Before I read it let me give you a little bit of context. The context here is that the northern ten tribes of Israel, that are often called Ephraim or Israel, have teamed up with the pagan Empire of Syria, the pagan nation of Syria, and they are threatening to attack the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Now the king at this time over the South is King Ahaz, and so he's obviously in a state of fear and trepidation about what to do in the face of this crisis, and so the prophet Isaiah, who was living in the eighth century before Christ at the time of King Ahaz, goes to King Ahaz to bring him a message of encouragement from the Lord. And in the midst of this message of encouragement, Isaiah gives this mysterious oracle of a virgin who will conceive and bear a son. So let's look at that passage together. This is the first reading, Isaiah 7:10–14 says:

Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, "Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven." But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test." And he said, "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? Therefore

the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Imman'u-el.

Pause there, that's where the prophecy stops. So notice three aspects of this prophecy. Number one, Isaiah is telling King Ahaz, "you can ask for miracle, you can ask for a sign, and it doesn't matter how big it is, it can be as high as heaven or as deep as sheol, and the Lord is going to give it to you" (see Isa 7:11). Now Ahaz, almost in a kind of false humility, says "Oh no, no, I don't want to put the Lord, my God, to the test" (see Isa 7:12). And God is angry with him for that so he responds and says "fine then, the Lord himself will give you a sign, and here is the sign: a virgin shall conceive and bear a son" (see Isa 7:14). Now pause there. This is an extremely controversial verse because the Hebrew word there that many translations—like the New American Bible or the Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition—translate the word as virgin. The Hebrew word there is *almah*, and this word is sometimes translated as a young woman, because in many contexts that appears to be the meaning. So scholars have debated for a long time: is it a virgin? meaning a woman hasn't had marital relation; or is it just a generic reference to a young woman? In other words, is the emphasis on her age or on her virginity?

Now that's an unfortunate debate because in English we actually have a virtually exact equivalent to this Hebrew word *almah*. *Almah* doesn't exactly mean just young woman. The Hebrew word *almah*, the best English equivalent for it is the word maiden. It's a kind of archaic or traditional English word, but if you've read 19th century novels, or even early 20th century works, whenever you see the word maiden, the word maiden means a young woman who is not married and therefore has not had marital relations. So in other words it's a both/and: she's both young and a virgin. That's what the word *almah* means and you can see this in other passages in the book of Genesis. Genesis 24:43 says that "Rebecca was an *almah* (a maiden), whom no man had known." In other words, she had not had relations with a man. So there is an emphasis here on her virginity, and yet she bears a son and then she's going to name that son Emmanuel. Again the Hebrew matters here, the word Emmanuel in Hebrew means *God with us* or *with us is God*.

So what does Matthew do? Matthew looks at that passage in the Old Testament and, although if you go back to Isaiah 7, 8, and 9—and I don't have time to do this now—there are some reasons to think that on one level that prophecy may be kind of preliminarily fulfilled in the figure of King Hezekiah, who was the son of Ahaz, and during whose time the crisis with Syria and Ephraim came to an end—that the Lord delivered his people at that time—there are other elements of the prophecies

of Isaiah 7, 8, and 9 that appear to describe a child who's going to go well beyond what King Hezekiah ever was. So for example, in Isaiah 9 it says "unto us a son is born, and his name shall be Wonderful Counselor, Everlasting Father, Mighty God and Prince of Peace" (Isa 9:6). So is this king a divine king or is he just human? There is kind of this development of this great King who will be so great that he will be called Mighty God and Everlasting Father. So the prophecy in Isaiah may have a preliminary fulfillment in King Hezekiah, but it has its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus. So Matthew is saying that Isaiah chapter 7, that virginal conception, is truly fulfilled in the birth of Jesus Christ, who was conceived of the power of the Holy Spirit and who is in fact literally *God with us*. In other words, the divine son of God has become man in the incarnation so that his title is Emmanuel, *God with us*. That's the good news that Matthew is announcing in his Gospel. The good news, not just of the birth of the Messiah, but of *God with us*. In order to sum this up, I love the writing of Pope Benedict XVI. In the third volume of his book *Jesus Nazareth*,³ he actually recognized that there are aspects of this prophecy from Isaiah that can be applied to the birth of Hezekiah in the eighth century BC, but he also says that the word of Isaiah is like "is a word in waiting."⁴ In other words, it's waiting for someone to come who is greater than any Davidic king, who will fulfill this miraculous virginal conception and become *God with us*, and that word was waiting until Jesus came and fulfilled it in the New Testament in the first century A.D.

With that said—much more could be said because it is a very complicated topic—I hope it gives you a little bit of insight into why the Church puts these two readings together, the prophecy of the virginal birth in Isaiah 7 and then the actual virginal conception and birth of Jesus in Matthew 1.

The bridge between those two is Psalm 24. Psalm 24 is a very famous psalm, it is a psalm of the royal coming of a King into his city. And in that psalm, Psalm 24:3 and following we read:

Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
And who shall stand in his holy place?
He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to what is false,
and does not swear deceitfully.

³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives* (New York: Image, 2012).

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives*, 50.

He will receive blessing from the LORD,
and vindication from the God of his salvation.
Such is the generation of those who seek him,
who seek the face of the God of Jacob.

So here the psalm is describing the one who is worthy to come into the city, and not just into the city, but into the Temple. And it has this refrain “Let the LORD enter, He is the King of Glory” (cf. Is 7c, 10b). So again, it’s about the coming of the Lord, it’s about the coming of the King, and both those things take place in the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, because in the birth of Jesus Nazareth, the Messiah, the king of Israel comes. But in the birth of Jesus Nazareth God himself also comes to be with his people in the flesh as the God-man, as the one who is fully human and fully divine.

The second reading then takes us to Romans 1 where we see the same themes. In Romans 1:1–7 the Church brings us all full-circle back to the good news. What is the good news? Paul tells us:

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

So what is that all about? Well notice the two-fold emphasis: the good news is that Jesus is both the Messiah, the king, the son of David; and also the Lord, the divine son of God. That’s the good news, the great mystery of what would later be called, the incarnation. That is the good news of Christmas.

Okay, so those are the readings for this Sunday. Before I bring it to a close though, what I would like to do is just step back from this all. We have seen Isaiah prophesy virginal conception, we’ve seen Matthew emphasize the virginal conception of Jesus, and of course if you’re Christian—if you grew up Christian, if you grew up Catholic—you know about the incarnation, you know about the virgin birth, about the virginal conception of Jesus. But we want to still ask ourselves the question, why? Why is Jesus born of a virgin? Why couldn’t he have been born of the natural union of a man and a woman? What’s the reason? What’s the deeper

reason for the virgin birth? Yes, it was prophesied in Old Testament Scriptures, in the book of Isaiah, but why does God do it this way? For help with this, I'd like to just take a few points from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.⁵ Again, the *Catechism* is the official compendium of the Church's teaching, and I've just outlined a few points here that the *Catechism* gives us that I'd like to highlight.

Number one, the reason Christ is born of a virgin—the *Catechism* teaches us—is because the virginal conception shows us that the birth of Jesus was “a divine work that surpasses all human understanding” (CCC 497). It is very important to emphasize that. In other words, this is a miracle, this is something that is a mystery that we can't fully grasp, that we can't fully understand: that God, the God of the universe, could become man through the virginal conception in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Second, the *Catechism* highlights that it is the fulfillment of prophecy. We have already seen that very much. The Church teaches very clearly in paragraph 497 that the virginal conception was the fulfillment “of the divine promise given through Isaiah.” So although again, as I mentioned, scholars may continue to debate how exactly to interpret the context of the prophecy of Isaiah, the Church is very clear, based on the Gospel of Matthew, that she interprets this prophecy as one of the virginal conception of Christ.⁶

Third, sometimes people, especially in our day and time, are tempted to question whether the virgin birth, the story of the virgin birth, isn't just mythology. Maybe it's just a legend, maybe it's just a kind of folktale that we're meant to derive some deeper meaning from, but it didn't necessarily happen that way. I mean after all, as a rule, virgins don't have babies. So people sometimes are kind of scandalized by the virginal conception of Christ, but the Church teaches very clearly in CCC 498, that the virginal conception of Jesus was neither “a legend” nor is it “pagan mythology.” In other words, this is history. It's a miracle, but it's a miracle in the order of history. You actually see this if you look at the early church.

⁵ Catholic Church. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd Ed. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000. Print.

⁶ “I believe that in our own day, after all the efforts of critical exegesis, we can share anew this sense of astonishment at the fact that a saying from the year 733 B.C., incomprehensible for so long, came true at the moment of the conception of Jesus Christ— that God did indeed give us a great sign intended for the whole world.” Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives* (New York: Image, 2012), 50–51.

[Fourth point] If you look at the writings of early Christians in the early church fathers, from the beginning, the testimony of the belief in the virgin birth was met with mockery and incomprehension and rejection by Jews and pagans alike. Sometimes modern skeptics will say, “well you know, ancient Christians believed in the virginal birth of Jesus because they were so primitive and so credulous, everybody believed that kind of stuff back then.” Nothing could be further from the truth. Both ancient Jews and ancient pagans alike rejected the virginal birth of Jesus as something that was ridiculous, because ancient people, like modern people, knew full well that virgins don’t have babies. They knew that this would take something on the order of a supernatural, miraculous act of God for a virgin to conceive a child in her womb. But that’s exactly what the Church is claiming. That’s exactly what the Gospel of Matthew is claiming, and the Gospel of Luke. Jesus was, in fact, actually conceived in a miraculous virginal conception.

Fifth and finally, what then is the reason for it? Why does God do it this way? why does God come into the world through the virginal birth of Jesus? The answer that the *Catechism* gives is that the virginal conception of Christ is one of the ways God reveals to us the mystery of the incarnation. In other words, this is the way God reveals that Jesus Christ is not merely human and he is also not merely divine. He’s true God and true man, he’s fully human and at the same time fully divine. He is not like 50% god and 50% man. So what happens is the virginal conception reveals that in his divine nature, Jesus has only God as his father. In other words, it reveals that he is the true son of God, the natural son of God. Angels and human beings: we are all children of God, but we are children of God by adoption. We are creatures that are adopted children of God, but Jesus is the natural son of God because he shares the divine nature. He is the eternal son of God, and the virginal conception of Jesus reveals that to us, that he has only God as father, so he is fully divine. At the same time though, the virginal conception tells us he’s born of a woman, he’s born of the Virgin Mary. So he also receives his human nature from Mary, his mother. So he is naturally the son of his mother, the *Catechism* says. In other words, Jesus is naturally the son of the Father, according to his divine nature, and he is naturally the son of his mother Mary, according to his human nature. And in this sense, the divine and human have been wedded. Heaven and earth have come together in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary so that humanity, all of humanity, might be redeemed through Christ and might be invited to share in the divine life, in the sonship that Christ reveals to us in the mystery of the incarnation. That is the good news of Christmas, that in the conception of Jesus, God isn’t just with us in spirit, he isn’t just with us in the sense that he is on our side, he is in fact Emmanuel, *God with us* in the flesh.