



Sunday Mass Preparation Guide

Including

The Readings

**First Reading
Responsorial Psalm
Second Reading
Gospel**

Study Guide

**Study Guide including Background on Readings
And Thought Questions**

In-Depth Reflection

**A Thought-Provoking Written Analysis on
One of the Readings**

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USCCB » Bible » Daily Readings

DECEMBER 24, 2017

Fourth Sunday of Advent
Lectionary: 11

Reading 1

2 SM 7:1-5, 8B-12, 14A, 16

When King David was settled in his palace,
and the LORD had given him rest from his enemies on every side,
he said to Nathan the prophet,
"Here I am living in a house of cedar,
while the ark of God dwells in a tent!"
Nathan answered the king,
"Go, do whatever you have in mind,
for the LORD is with you."
But that night the LORD spoke to Nathan and said:
"Go, tell my servant David, 'Thus says the LORD:
Should you build me a house to dwell in?'

"It was I who took you from the pasture
and from the care of the flock
to be commander of my people Israel.
I have been with you wherever you went,
and I have destroyed all your enemies before you.
And I will make you famous like the great ones of the earth.
I will fix a place for my people Israel;
I will plant them so that they may dwell in their place
without further disturbance.
Neither shall the wicked continue to afflict them as they did of old,
since the time I first appointed judges over my people Israel.
I will give you rest from all your enemies.
The LORD also reveals to you
that he will establish a house for you.
And when your time comes and you rest with your ancestors,
I will raise up your heir after you, sprung from your loins,
and I will make his kingdom firm.
I will be a father to him,
and he shall be a son to me.

Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me;
your throne shall stand firm forever."

Responsorial Psalm**PS 89:2-3, 4-5, 27, 29**

R. (2a) For ever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.

The promises of the LORD I will sing forever;
through all generations my mouth shall proclaim your faithfulness.
For you have said, "My kindness is established forever";
in heaven you have confirmed your faithfulness.

R. For ever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.

"I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
I have sworn to David my servant:
Forever will I confirm your posterity
and establish your throne for all generations."

R. For ever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.

"He shall say of me, 'You are my father,
my God, the Rock, my savior.'
Forever I will maintain my kindness toward him,
and my covenant with him stands firm."

R. For ever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.

Reading 2**ROM 16:25-27**

Brothers and sisters:

To him who can strengthen you,
according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ,
according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret for long ages
but now manifested through the prophetic writings and,
according to the command of the eternal God,
made known to all nations to bring about the obedience of faith,
to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ
be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Alleluia**LK 1:38**

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.
May it be done to me according to your word.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel**LK 1:26-38**

The angel Gabriel was sent from God
to a town of Galilee called Nazareth,
to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph,
of the house of David,
and the virgin's name was Mary.

And coming to her, he said,
"Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you."
But she was greatly troubled at what was said
and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.
Then the angel said to her,
"Do not be afraid, Mary,
for you have found favor with God.

"Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,
and you shall name him Jesus.
He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High,
and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father,
and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever,
and of his kingdom there will be no end."
But Mary said to the angel,
"How can this be,
since I have no relations with a man?"
And the angel said to her in reply,
"The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.
Therefore the child to be born
will be called holy, the Son of God.
And behold, Elizabeth, your relative,
has also conceived a son in her old age,
and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren;
for nothing will be impossible for God."
Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.
May it be done to me according to your word."
Then the angel departed from her.

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FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 18, 2016 A

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.*

Sharing life: What do you like most and least about Christmas, personally and liturgically?

Facilitator reads focus statement: 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).

Read the assigned Scripture readings, pausing briefly after each one. Consider going over the commentary after each reading, if you have not done so prior to your meeting.

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. "*Whereas, in his day, the prophet probably hoped that the soon-to-be-born son of Ahaz, i.e., Hezekiah, would bring about the blessedness of God-with-us, Christians understand that the divine declaration 'I am with you' has been realized only in and through the person and mission of Jesus, the Christ*" (Patricia Sanchez).

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.

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 Joseph 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. 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. What verse or image spoke to you most today? Why?
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?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on this Sunday’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.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray for the grace to take seriously your call to live a holy life. Pray for all who are traveling during this season. Pray for preachers of the Word. Pray that our liturgies may touch the hearts of non-church-going Catholics who will come to church this Christmas. ©

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MATTHEW HIGHLIGHTS JOSEPH'S ROLE

Reflection for Fourth Sunday in Advent, Cycle A

If you compare Luke's infancy narrative (Chaps. 1-2) with Matthew's (Mark and John's Gospels do not have infancy narratives), you will find that Luke highlights Mary's role and Matthew highlights Joseph's role. Why is this? Matthew is writing for a Jewish audience and he needs to show them that Jesus is a true descendent of Abraham and David. Joseph is Jesus' link to the house of David. Matthew needs to show that Jesus, even though he had no human father is the Son of David while not ignoring Jesus' divine origin. Jesus' divine origin is shown in his virginal conception by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Also, in this Gospel, Matthew wishes to portray Joseph as a "righteous man", as a law-abiding man who blends submission to the law with compassion for others. This is done by telling us that Joseph intended to divorce Mary—not to do so would be to tolerate evil in his midst (the assumption here is, of course, that Mary had committed the sin of fornication). By being willing to divorce Mary, Joseph showed that he loved God more than he loved Mary whom he also loved with all his heart. But Joseph planned to divorce Mary "quietly", thus not humiliating her. If he "went public", Mary may have been stoned to death for her sin of infidelity. This shows that Joseph's sense of justice was tempered with mercy.

Then Matthew tells us how Joseph's intentions were "vetoed" by God's intervention. An angel in a dream tells Joseph to take Mary into his home because the baby has been conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. Here again, Joseph shows himself to be a righteous man. The righteous person is the one who is obedient to God's revelation no matter how scandalous it may seem to others.

By giving Jesus two names, Matthew is revealing to his audience something about Jesus' identity and role. The name *Jesus* means "One who saves". Jesus mission was 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.

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

In Joseph we find a wonderful example of a man who is a faithful and loving husband, a caring father and an obedient servant of God. The truly obedient servant of God is one who *listens* to and *acts* on God's word. In today's gospel, Joseph *listens* to the voice of the angel who tells him not to be afraid to take Mary into his home. Many Protestant Christians and some Catholic Christians are afraid to take Mary into their homes and hearts. If we are one of those people we would do well to listen and to obey the voice of the angel. In next Sunday's Gospel on the Feast of the Holy Family we will have two more examples of Joseph *listening* to God and *acting* on the word he hears. The angel will tell him to leave his homeland and go to Egypt with Mary and the child. Sometime later the angel will tell Joseph to return to his native country. On both occasions, Joseph, that good and just man *listens* to God and is *obedient* to his word.

Claimed in love

The following story is adopted from *Believing the Impossible* by Barbara Brown Taylor, from *Gospel Medicine*.

As it happened, they both had been adopted as infants, so both had a special love and understanding for children without parents. Even before they met and fell in love, each hoped one day to give a child the same happy home they had known from their adoptive parents. After they married and had two children of their own, they decided to look into adopting a baby girl from China. While a boy will one day be able to take over the family farm, many baby girls in China are given up by parents who cannot afford to care for them.

Overseas adoptions, especially adoptions of Chinese children, are a demanding and expensive process, but they

persevered. After many months of negotiations, preparations and waiting, they received the telephone call to go to China and pick-up their daughter. Forty-eight hours later, they were taken to a dingy building that served as an orphanage. She reached down into the crib and picked up the child; he gathered them both in his arms and kissed the child on the forehead.

They *claimed her, in love*, as their own. She was now their daughter; they were now her Mom and Dad.

As this couple welcomed this little girl as their own, Joseph is asked by God to welcome the Christ child as his own. In today's Gospel—Matthew's version of Jesus' birth—the whole grand event depends on Joseph, whose life has been turned upside down by the angel's news. If Joseph believes the angel, the story can go on. Joseph accepts the son as his own, not as a matter of biology, but as a matter of love and compassion, of trust and faith. God's birth in our midst depends on human partners—a Mary, a Joseph, a you, a me—willing to believe the impossible, willing to claim the unwanted, willing to love the helpless and neediest, willing to put aside our fears and dare to hope that God is with us. Every one of us is called to be Joseph—to welcome God in our midst.

Wally, the Reluctant Innkeeper

Parents and grandparents, the following would be a nice story to share with your children and grandchildren. The story is adapted from a story by Dina Donahue in *Guideposts*.

Wally was big for a first grader. Everybody loved Wally. No bully, he was the gentlest of souls. Wally was a friend even to the smallest kids at school.

When the school staged its Christmas play, Wally wanted to be one of the shepherds. But the teacher directing the play had a larger role in mind for Wally. Wally was cast as the innkeeper. Wally practiced and practiced, but became more and more nervous about his lines.

The night of the play, everything was going beautifully. Then came the part where Mary and Joseph knocked on the door of the inn. Wally answered the door right on cue and gave his line.

“What do you want?”

“We seek lodging,” came the response.

“Seek it elsewhere, the inn is filled,” Wally replied, with just the right touch of brusque annoyance.

“But, sir, we have tried everywhere, we have come a long way, and we are very tired.”

“Go away,” Wally properly commanded. “There is no room in my inn for you.”

“But sir, my wife is with child. Don't you have a corner where we can get out of the cold.”

That's when it happened.

Wally broke his icy stare and looked at Mary. There was a long silence. The audience became nervous and uneasy. Everyone thought Wally had forgotten his lines.

“No, be gone,” the prompter whispered.

“No, be gone,” Wally said, halfheartedly.

Joseph sadly placed his arm around Mary as they began to move off the stage. Wally couldn't stand it any longer. Big he was, cruel he could never be. With big tears welling in his eyes he gave a performance never to be forgotten:

“Wait, Joseph, don’t go!” Wally cried. “Bring Mary back. You can have my room and I’ll sleep in the cold.”

A few people thought Wally had ruined the Christmas pageant. But most knew better.

Wally the reluctant innkeeper embraced the spirit of these final days of Advent, expressed so eloquently in Isaac Watt’s beautiful hymn: “let every heart prepare him room.” The reality is that Christmas is a challenge to us and our values and our dreams. Just as Joseph is challenged by God to welcome the child into his home and hearts despite the difficult circumstances, God challenges us to welcome his Christ into our lives and allow the child to transform our hearts and homes in his peace and justice.