

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Light four candles on the Advent wreath. Then pray the prayer below together; it uses verses from Isaiah 11.1-10, a passage about Israel's messiah, which Christians apply to Jesus.

LEADER: People who walked in darkness have seen a great light.

ALL: On those who lived in a land of deep darkness light has shone.

LEADER: For unto us a child is born.

ALL: Unto us a son is given.

LEADER: The government will be upon him; he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

ALL: He will establish and uphold the throne of David with justice and righteousness.

Most of us have naming stories. Our parents pick a family name, a popular name, or a saint's name. As we live, our names become synonymous with ourselves. Sometimes friends, colleagues, and family members rename us with nicknames that say who we are to them.

The birth story Matthew tells about Jesus begins, ends, and centers in names that describe



who Jesus is. In its seven short verses the story calls the new child *Jesus Christ, child of the Holy Spirit, son, Emmanuel, Jesus.*

The story begins, "This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about." *Christ* is not a personal or family name. *Christ* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *messiah*. The word in both languages means the *anointed one* or *king*. This story is about the birth of the messiah. The child is conceived by the Holy Spirit, so the child is God's Son and the son of Mary.

The name *Emmanuel* means *God-with-us*. With this name, Matthew introduces Jesus' mission and a major theme of his gospel. Jesus is the messiah,

the king named God-with-us, whom the prophet Isaiah long ago promised God would send.

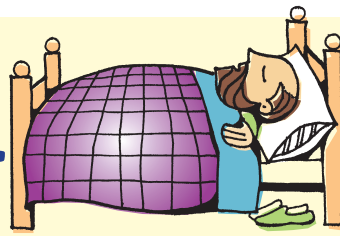
The name *Jesus* for the child also foreshadows his mission. The angel tells Joseph what the child shall be called and explains the meaning of the name—"He shall be called Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." *Jesus* means *he saves*.

In emphasizing the names *Emmanuel* and *Jesus*, Matthew sees beyond Jesus' birth to the whole significance of his coming among us—his life, death, and resurrection. Jesus is messiah, Son of God, God-with-us, Savior. Matthew's Christmas story is really more about the risen Jesus than the baby Jesus.

All of us have birth stories. Some of us were long-awaited, only children. Some of us celebrate adoption days in our families rather than birthdays. Some caused difficult births, others harrowing rides to the hospital in snow or hurricane winds.

● **What is your birth story? What were your parents hoping for you at your birth? From whom do you get your name?**

GOSPEL



Joseph takes Mary into his home.

NARRATOR: This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. When his mother Mary was engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her husband, an upright man unwilling to expose her to the law, decided to divorce her quietly. Such was his intention when suddenly the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream.

ANGEL: Joseph, son of David, have no fear about taking Mary as your wife. It is by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived this child. She is to have a son and you are to name him Jesus,

because he will save his people from their sins.

NARRATOR: All this happened to fulfill what God had said through the prophet Isaiah.

ISAIAH: The virgin shall be with child and give birth to a son, and they shall call him Emmanuel.

NARRATOR: This name means *God with us*. When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had directed him and received Mary into his home as his wife.

Matthew 1.18-24

Joseph claims and names Jesus.

Matthew and Luke both begin their gospels with stories of Jesus' birth. Matthew's story focuses on the role of Joseph; Luke's story focuses on Mary. In both gospels angels bring good news from God to the parents.

The angelic annunciation in Matthew's gospel is to Joseph, calling him to take the pregnant Mary as his wife and name and claim her son. In the overall plan of the lectionary, this 4th Sunday of Advent is father's day.

In Matthew's story "of how the birth of Jesus Christ came about," Joseph is engaged to Mary but has not yet brought her to his home—the action that seals the marriage. Mary must be a teenager, a girl who is marriageable age, perhaps 14 or

15. Joseph may be older; at least that's one explanation for why he appears only in stories about Jesus' birth and growing up.

According to the gospel story, betrothal is as binding a commitment as marriage, since it requires divorce to break it. As in marriage, infidelity provides grounds for dissolving the betrothal relationship. Bringing the bride from her family to the groom's home seems to be the final step in marriage.

The gospel tells us Joseph, Mary's husband, is just, *dikaios*, or as the New American Bible translates the word *upright*. For some today and probably in Jesus' time, being just and upright means keeping the law—being a law-abiding person.

The law in Leviticus 20.10 makes death the punishment for adultery. We don't know how often people carried out the punishment the law required.

When Joseph finds Mary pregnant with a child not his own, he knows he can bring the full force of the law upon her, but he makes a compassionate judgment to divorce her quietly.

We can't be sure what might otherwise have happened to a very-pregnant girl in 1st-century Palestine or her illegitimate child. The upright Joseph does not want to shame or endanger his betrothed.

● What characteristics does Joseph possess that you value in a husband? In a father?

His decision to divorce Mary secretly does not really satisfy Joseph. He can't stop thinking about Mary. He can't let go of this troubling pregnancy. Joseph knows this girl, whom the gospels elsewhere characterize as holy among women. Her pregnancy sideswipes and befuddles him. He wants a bigger, whole picture that explains what is going on with Mary. What can't he see?

The gospel tells us Joseph sleeps on his decision. Joseph opens his unconscious self to nourishing rest; he opens himself to the nonrational, spiritual world and to the infinite, whole picture he seeks. He entrusts himself to Holy Mystery in going to sleep. In his sleep Joseph dreams the future of the child.



God will send Emmanuel.

Sunday's first reading is the passage from the prophet Isaiah cited in Sunday's gospel. In this passage Isaiah confronts a faithless young king with a promise that Israel's faithful God will one day send a king named Emmanuel, God-with-us, to the people.

Ahaz is king of Judah (2 Kings 16). His reign begins in 735 B.C. when Ahaz is about 20 years old. That same year two neighboring kings put pressure on him to rise up against Assyria with them. They threaten to seize Ahaz's throne if he does not join them. They want his treasury and army.

Historically, Ahaz has at least three options. As the prophet Isaiah recommends, he can trust God, sit tight, and let the threat of his two neighbors fizzle. Or, second, he can join the two kings against the rising superpower. Or, third, he can turn to Assyria to protect him against the two kings who threaten him. The latter course means inviting the fox into the chicken coop.

Matthew's gospel is written some 80 years after Jesus' birth and some 50 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. So the evangelist can put into the dream from hindsight the promise Mary's child brings into the world.

The angel in Joseph's dream tells him—

- The Spirit of God has conceived this child in his fiancé.
- Mary will have a son.
- Joseph is to name and claim the child as his own.
- The name reveals the child's mission. The name *Jesus* means he *saves*.

● How is sleeping on a decision an act of prayer?

In our own lives we have to make the journey Joseph makes from the law and its requirements to compassionate judgment and action. This is conscience. Joseph's story calls us to listen to the Spirit of God that lives within us in the deepest reaches of our psyches and never lets up on us, waking or sleeping, until we bring to life in our relationships what only we

can do. Our baptisms call us to embody the promise of the Spirit in us, to become Emmanuel, and bring God among those we love and try to love.

Each of us is called like Joseph to dream a future for the children of promise born among us today. A hundred million children in the world need primary education. Refugees forced from their homes and immigrants seeking better lives include many children.

- Who are children of promise in your life?
- What can your parish or work group do to help children of promise in your area?
- What words do you use to tell your child or children what promise you see in them and what faithfulness they can expect from you?

DO SOMETHING

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- Who can I invite to join our family Christmas that will be alone otherwise?
- Visit UNICEF.org, and read stories of its work with children around the world.

In the verses just before Sunday's reading, God directs Isaiah to assure Ahaz that God will be faithful to him—option one. "Don't let your heart be faint because of these two upstarts from the north! They are only smoldering sticks, and they will quickly burn out. If you believe and stand firm, your reign will survive" (Isaiah 7.4,9).

As Sunday's reading begins, Isaiah invites Ahaz to ask for a sign of God's fidelity.

Ahaz is a faithless king.

The Holy One spoke to Ahaz, saying: Ask for a sign from the Holy One, your God; let it be deep as the nether world, or high as the sky!

But Ahaz answered, "I will not ask! I will not tempt the Holy One!"

Then Isaiah said, "Listen, O house of David! Is it not enough for you to weary human beings, must you also weary my God? Therefore the Holy One will give you a sign: a young woman shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel."

Isaiah 7.10-14

Ahaz refuses a sign and reveals his hand. The story of his reign tells us that Ahaz takes the third option and approaches the king of Assyria, saying, "I am your servant and son. Come up and rescue me from the hand of the king of Aram and from the king of Israel, who are attacking me" (2 Kings 16.7).

Isaiah is against Ahaz's alliance with Assyria, which will cost him tribute from the royal treasury and which ultimately will mean allegiance to Assyria and Assyrian gods.



The child Emmanuel is the sign Ahaz will not ask for. Emmanuel is the sign that God will save the people from their enemies and keep the promise to the house of David.

Many Christians today are unaware of the Old Testament background of this passage. Christians assume Isaiah foresees the birth of Jesus, and do not know that he is addressing events in his own time.

Jesus' followers drew on these holy writings to articulate Jesus' identity and significance for their lives. They saw in Isaiah's prophecy of Emmanuel a passage that expressed who Jesus was—God-with-us, the sign of God's faithful presence among them. They saw in Mary, the young woman in Isaiah's words.

In this Emmanuel prophecy and also in Isaiah 9 and 11, which we read during Advent in Cycle A, early Christians reinterpreted their Jewish scriptures in the light of Jesus' coming and asserted the kinship between earlier Israelites and themselves. They

were Jews who had come to believe Jesus was the messiah for whom they had long been waiting.

● **What name do you give the child whose birth we celebrate this Christmas?**

● **If you were invited to give the Christmas sermon, how would you express the significance of Jesus' whole life to the human race?**

PRAY

Pray for your own children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and all children of promise to conclude your Advent reflections. Close by singing "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming."

*Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming,
From tender stem hath sprung.
Of Jesse's lineage coming
As seers of old have sung.
It came, a blossom bright,
Amid the cold of winter,
When half spent was the night.*

*Isaiah 'twas forefold it,
The Rose I have in mind,
With Mary we behold it,
The Virgin Mother kind.
To show God's love aright,
She bore to us a Savior,
When half spent was the night.*



Joan Mitchell, CSJ, the editor of *SUNDAY BY SUNDAY*, holds a Masters of Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School and a Ph.D. in New Testament from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN.