

## Advent 4A (12/19/10 – God with Us ... to Save Us)

In the Name of JESUS. [Amen]

Names – at least in Holy Scripture – mean something. *Abram* becomes *Abraham*, since he will be the “father of a multitude” – indeed, the father of all believers. *Isaac* is named *Isaac* because Sarah “laughed” at the thought of conceiving and bearing a son at the age of 90. *Samuel* can mean “God hears” – for God heard the prayer of barren Hannah and gave her a son. *Solomon* is related to the word for “peace.” Solomon is allowed to build the Temple from which the blessed *peace* of sins atoned for will flow forth until the coming of Christ. And *Isaiah* – the prophet of God whose voice we have heard for the past several Sundays in our *Old Testament Lesson* – his name means “salvation (is) of Yah(weh).” He is blessed above all Prophets to proclaim in great detail the eternal salvation that the Lord God will work by His Suffering Servant, Who will be born of the Virgin.

Now we come to that Name above all names – the Name at which *every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that He is Lord, to the glory of God the Father* [PHI 2.10-11]. Now we come to the Name that God commanded Joseph to give to the Son of Mary.

But we have gotten ahead of ourselves. For, notice that I said, the *Son of Mary* – not **his** Son or **their** Son. As the Apostle and Evangelist St. Matthew tells us: *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 from the Holy Spirit.* [MT 1.18]. Joseph was thinking to *divorce her quietly ... unwilling to put her to shame ... being a just man* [1.19] Betrothal was tantamount to marriage in those days. If you were engaged, you did not mess around. Well, you didn't mess around, period ... but especially when engaged. And according to the Old Testament Law – which they were still under at the time – the fact that Mary was pregnant out of wedlock was grounds for stoning.

But Joseph was *a just man*, the text says. Which means that – despite the

betrayal and hurt he felt – he was not going to seek vengeance ... he was not going to try to hurt Mary, though he felt hurt ... he was not going to seek to cast upon Mary the full, deadly weight of God's Law. That Joseph was *a just man* means he knew that he himself was also a **sinner**, deserving God's wrath ... but receiving God's mercy because of the promised Savior Who was yet to come. Joseph was *a just man* because – as St. Paul explains about Abraham – he was justified by God ... declared just and righteous before God ... through his faith in the promises of God [ROM 4].

However, as usual, what we might think is being merciful is nothing compared to the mercy of God – even if it is truly merciful in some sense. In this case, it is **Joseph** who receives real mercy ... in the form of God graciously revealing to him from above the truth about Mary's pregnancy. For, it seems safe to assume that Mary had attempted to explain to Joseph just how it was she was with Child. Surely, she at least tried to explain about the angel Gabriel ... and the overshadowing of the Most High ... and the fact that this Child was none other than the Son of God [LK 1.35]. It is not Mary who needs Joseph's mercy ... but Joseph who needs God's – just as **we** need God's mercy ... love ... grace ... forgiveness ... and salvation.

So God graciously comes to Joseph in a special, divine communication – specifically, *in a dream*, our text says [MT 1.20]. And in that dream, God tells Joseph five important things. 1) ***Do not be afraid***. It seems that God (and His holy angels) must often encourage us **not** to be afraid. That is because, ever since the Fall, mankind has – rightfully – been afraid of the wrath of God against sin. And that fear of getting what we deserve – the thorns and thistles of life ... and eventual death – that fear spreads to all sorts of people and things and situations. But God does not always come in wrath. Though it **is** what we deserve because of our sins, it is **not** what we mostly get from God. Instead, we get His mercy ... and love.

In this case, Joseph should not be afraid to go ahead with his marriage to the still-virgin though pregnant Mary. Which is the second important thing God tells Joseph in this divine communication. 2) ***Do not fear to take Mary as your wife***. And here is the reason – which is the third point. 3) ***That***

*which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.* In other words, Mary has **not** been unfaithful – neither to Joseph ... nor to God (since all sin is ultimately sin against God’s command ... and therefore against God Himself). Mary is pregnant out of wedlock, yes. But she remains the faithful bride-to-be ... the faithful handmaiden of the Lord.

More importantly – Mary is pregnant in a special, one-of-a-kind, fulfillment-of-prophecy sort of way. As we heard through the Prophet Isaiah – by way of encouragement to King Ahaz and the Southern Kingdom of Judah: ***Behold, the Virgin shall conceive and bear a Son*** [7.14; MT 1.23]. Things may look bad, Joseph – just like it did for Judah in Isaiah’s day – but fear not, God gives you the sign of His gracious goodwill toward you and all people ... of His gracious deliverance from your enemies. ***Behold, the Virgin shall conceive and bear a Son.***

And this brings us to point 4) of God’s revelation to Joseph: Mary ***will bear a Son***. Not just any Son, but a Son Who is likewise a Son of David – yet at the same time is David’s Lord. This One in Mary’s womb is none other than ***Immanuel – God with us*** ... as St. Matthew explains the meaning of the Hebrew Name to us. And not in some general, nebulous way – but the Son conceived by the Holy Spirit in Mary’s womb is ***Immanuel – God with us*** in our very flesh and bones. In this Child, God will be with us in a way greater than His blessed presence when He walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden in the cool of the day [GEN 3.8]. God will not only be ***with us*** ... but will draw our humanity ***into*** Himself ... and redeem it. This One will know the weakness of our mortal flesh. He will know our hunger and our fatigue. He will understand our fears – though He Himself will not cower. He will know our temptations ... every one – yet will remain without sin.

And most importantly – much greater than God’s general omnipresence throughout the whole of His creation – is the revelation that 5) this ***Immanuel – God with us*** will be with us particularly as ***JESUS – for He will save His people from their sins*** [MT 1.21]. The Name that is above every Name and at which every knee in all creation shall bow is ***JESUS*** – which means, “Yahweh is salvation.” In Jesus – *Who was conceived by the Holy*

*Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary as we confess with Holy Scripture in the APOSTLES' CREED – God is with Us ... to Save Us.*

*Immanuel ... Jesus. God with Us ... to Save Us.* That is the blessed truth revealed to Joseph regarding that which the Holy Spirit conceived in Mary's womb. Joseph had nothing to fear about his beloved betrothed. There was no betrayal ... only fidelity – both on the part of the handmaiden ... and most especially on the part of God. The Lord would fulfill the promise He made to Ahaz – and the whole world – through His Prophet Isaiah. *Behold, the Virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and they shall call His Name Immanuel.* The promised Savior is on the scene – though not yet visible to the eye. He is yet concealed in the weakness of the created means God uses to bring His work of salvation to a fearful and dying world.

And God continues to work this way – and to be *Immanuel ... Jesus ... God with Us ... to Save Us.* Christ continues to come among us in a way that can be offensive in the eyes of doubt and fear and unbelief due to the weakness of our flesh. Christ comes in His Word ... particularly the Gospel-Word of His incarnation, death, and glorious resurrection – and He is *Immanuel ... Jesus ... God with Us ... to Save Us.* Christ comes concealed under the waters of Holy Baptism – to which He has attached His Word and promise to forgive sins and re-create us as God's beloved children – and He is *Immanuel ... Jesus ... God with Us ... to Save Us.* Christ comes in the Sacrament – concealed in/with/under the weakness of the created means of Bread and Wine that God uses to bring His once-for-all completed work of salvation to us ... hear and now – and He is *Immanuel ... Jesus ... God with Us ... to Save Us* in His Body and Blood.

Names mean something in Holy Scripture. *Behold, the Virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and they shall call His Name Immanuel.* [ISA 7.14] *She will bear a Son, and you shall call His Name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.* [MT 1.21] This Child, Whose birth we soon shall celebrate, is nothing less than *God with Us ... to Save Us.*

In the Name of the FATHER and of the ✠ SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT. [Amen]