



by Mary M. McGlone

[View Author Profile](#)

[**Join the Conversation**](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

December 18, 2016

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

“O come, O come, Emmanuel!” Each Advent season we hear it sung, sometimes in such beautiful chant that we think for a minute that it might be nice to live in a monastery and sing like that all the time. There’s a real danger in prayer, especially when it comes to sung prayer in this season. Beautiful music can lead us to sing petitions that we haven’t thought through and might not let so easily pass our lips if we had considered the implications.

Let’s assume that the just man, Joseph of Nazareth, had taken part in his community’s ongoing prayer for the coming of the Messiah. He, like all those around him had heard the prophecies, the visionary promises of flourishing deserts and a shoot that would sprout from the root of Jesse, the wonder-counselor child to be born of a virgin. It’s easy to pray for those things when you think they’re a dream.

Then one day he was face to face with his pregnant betrothed. The only thing he knew for sure was that the child was not his. We don’t know what he said, nor what she said. But we can assume he went off somewhere to make up his tormented mind, to choose what to do.

How does one pray in that situation? Perhaps he turned to Psalm 13: “How long Lord? Will you forget me forever? ... Give light to my eyes, lest I fall asleep in death.”

Lacking light, he did sleep, and in the vulnerability of slumber the word of the Lord got through to him: “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid.”

No real angel ever appears without announcing that there is nothing to fear. That’s the first leap of faith for human beings – it’s easier to believe in angels than to believe that there’s nothing to fear. But somehow Joseph’s hopes and faith were strengthened by the message of the dream.

As hard as it was to believe that their situation was God’s work, it was harder for him to fathom that Mary might have betrayed him and deserved to be abandoned – or worse.

At this point Luke and Matthew give us hints about the “he said, she said” conversation. She said “The angel told me that this child would be called the Son of the Most High and we should call him Jesus.” He said “I had already decided to name him Jesus.” And then, looking at her with awe he added, “He will be called Emmanuel.”

After that, Matthew tells us, “He took his wife into his home.”

Matthew tells us about Joseph not to prove the miracle of the virgin birth, but to reveal what it means to be a just person who is receptive to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit of love. Matthew introduces us to Joseph as a man whose faith was strong enough to believe that God might be doing something he himself had never anticipated. In Joseph’s dilemma we see someone seek to be faithful when justice seems at odds with mercy. As he followed the command to take Mary home without regard for his reputation and the potential for scandal, Joseph demonstrated a rare combination of humility and strength. The way those two qualities intermingled in him combined into the virtue of fear of the Lord, a profound reverence that filled him with the conviction that God would guide them through it all.

Joseph’s choice had to be made at one particular moment, but his whole life had prepared him for it, and he would live its consequences for the rest of his days. Joseph could never have imagined the impact his decision would have on history. Isaiah would have never imagined how his prophecy would be used to calm the man called to give Emmanuel a home. None of us ever really know how far the effects of our choices will ripple. Rather, we can only hope that we, like Joseph, can be receptive to the Spirit’s inspirations. That’s exactly what Paul is talking about in his letter to the Romans. Joseph understood it as being open to dreams; Paul calls it

being holy.

In this fourth week of Advent, these readings invite us to pray for Joseph's kind of openness to God's unpredictable projects for our world. As we kindle our fourth candle let us pray that we might open our minds to see beyond our own dreams and schemes so that Emmanuel may be ever more present in us and through us.

ISAIAH 7:10-14

There are few Old Testament verses which have been given as much importance as Isaiah 7:14, "the virgin shall conceive and bear a son." Little does it matter that Isaiah spoke those words to Ahaz, a frightened king who didn't have the courage to ask God for a sign of divine favor even after Isaiah suggested that he do so. (Did he worry that he wouldn't get it? Was it a show of false piety, an unwillingness to "test" God? Was it fear of what could be required if he got the assurance of an incontrovertible sign?) Isaiah's intent with this prophecy was to assure Ahaz that although he might be afraid, the most vulnerable of his people, the pregnant young woman, had the confidence to name her child Emmanuel, "With us is God."

Isaiah is undoubtedly Christianity's favorite Hebrew prophet. Not only does he offer beautiful words of consolation and hope, but our earliest brothers and sisters in the faith interpreted much of Jesus' life through Isaiah's teaching, particularly his songs of the suffering servant. So it is only natural for us to want to appropriate Isaiah 7:14 as a prediction of Jesus' birth and a proof text about Mary's virginity. But in doing so we may miss the richness of Isaiah's prophecy.

The key word of this selection is Emmanuel. That one word is a creedal statement, an expression of hope and even a warning of judgment. As a creed, using the name Emmanuel proclaims the Judeo-Christian faith that the God of the universe is here for us. This is no clock-maker God, but the God who, in the words of his servant Francis, is a shepherd who takes on the smell of his sheep. Because of that, the name Emmanuel is also an expression of hope. As Paul will say, "If God is for us, who can be against us? ... Who will condemn? ... What will separate us from the love of Christ?" (Romans 8:31-39) Finally, as Ahaz might have feared, Emmanuel is a word of judgment. It demands that all believers act as a people whose God is with them empowering them to act as their God acts and to stand up before the powers of evil.

All of that is packed into the name Emmanuel. But perhaps more than the theological content, the Emmanuel prophecy communicates the emotional quality of God's motherly love. The God who comes as Emmanuel is like the mother who holds the frightened child, assuring him that her presence and her embrace, vulnerable as she may be, offer greater protection than any weapon, fence or lock. That carries us into the heart of a faith that can confidently and joyfully proclaim "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

There are few Old Testament verses better known than Isaiah 7:14. Today's liturgy invites us to plumb its depths and allow it to shape our hearts and hopes.

ROMANS 1:1-7

Paul never would have survived in the world of Twitter. He began his letter to the Romans with one sentence composed of at least 14 clauses. (705 characters in the NAB) That was excessive even for his time and culture. But there was much that he wanted to say in his introductory message. His message had to do with who he was, who Christ Jesus was and who Christians were all called to be. Rather than criticize Paul, we might admire how much he was able to pack into his opening statement. More than that, Paul would want us to ponder everything he wanted to get across in these 130 words.

The centerpiece of Paul's opening is what he calls "the gospel of God." That is the good news about God's Son, descended from David and revealed as Son of God through the power of the Holy Spirit in his resurrection. This complex idea is one of Paul's attempts to interpret Christ for people who knew the Jewish tradition. The fact that Christ was son of David emphasized not only his humanity, but the fact that he came from the royal line of humble origins to whom God had promised an eternal reign. Thus, in those few words Paul has explained in detail that Jesus is the long awaited savior. When Paul says that Jesus was "established as Son of God in power," he's not implying that divine sonship was an add-on to Jesus' identity, but that in the resurrection he assumed the life-giving power that only resurrection could unleash, the power to bring all flesh into unity in himself. The Gospel Paul describes is the good news of the incarnation on behalf of all people. The good news is that salvation means sharing in Christ's resurrected life.

This Gospel is what gives Paul and the Roman community their identity. They did not choose apostleship but were called and set apart by and for the Gospel. Paul

believes that because they know the Gospel, they have no choice but to be its heralds. If they are not impelled to apostleship, they have not understood the message. That gives us something to ponder for a long time.

MATTHEW 1:18-24

In 2013, Pope Francis decreed that St. Joseph should be celebrated by name in the church's most common Eucharistic Prayers. While devotion to Joseph is not comparable to the reverence given to Mary, he holds an extraordinary place in the tradition, especially in light of how little is said of him in Scripture. Outside of Matthew and Luke's infancy narratives, Joseph is mentioned only in the Gospel of John where nothing is said of him except that he was reputedly the father of Jesus. What can we know of Joseph from those few references?

In keeping with his Jewish insider perspective, unlike Luke, Matthew's nativity narrative emphasizes Joseph, the patriarch of the family. Without repeating the well-known details, we can note how Matthew presents Joseph as a bridge figure from one covenant to another. His name recalls Joseph, the son of Jacob, the rejected dreamer who saved his family from famine. Like Joseph of Egypt, Joseph of Nazareth would meet God in dreams that revealed how to save his own family.

When Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man he hints at the terrible dilemma Joseph faced upon discovering Mary's pregnancy. The law allowed him to have Mary stoned (Deuteronomy 22:20-21). It actually obliged him to divorce her, annulling the marriage contract lest he sully the line of David with impurity. On the other hand, the Jewish scriptural tradition acclaimed the God who was known for having mercy. When Israel played the harlot, God was depicted as luring the people back to the covenant saying "I will espouse you in love and in mercy" (Hosea 2:21).

Joseph's religious heritage offered him no single answer to the dilemma presented by his pregnant spouse. The demands of the law seemingly contradicted the divine practice of mercy. His own preferences must have led the way because in the end, all it took was an angel appearing in a dream to convince Joseph that he could bypass the law and make the child of God his own.

Of course, Matthew's nativity account is the overture to his Gospel. As it announces coming themes through the details of a story with deep roots in the past, it bequeaths to us a narrative that is truer than any simply factual account could ever

be. Matthew presents Joseph not only as a dreamer, but also the son of David which means he is the heir of God's promise of a kingdom that would last forever (2 Samuel 7:12-16). Thus there is a wonderful paradox in the angel's comforting message. Joseph is called, precisely as the son of David, to allow an unknown into the lineage, trusting that Mary's child has been engendered through the work of God's Spirit and carries its own purity, a holiness beyond what any ethnic lineage could assure.

The angel of the dream instructed Joseph to call the child "Jesus," a common name whose etymology probably means God saves, or God will save. In the act of naming him, Joseph both claimed Jesus as his own and foreshadowed his divinely determined vocation. As a last word, just to bolster him, the angel made the first evangelical reference to the fulfillment of prophecy. Joseph should not worry, the angel assured him. Isaiah the prophet had spoken of this day as the time when God would dwell among the people.

The time of Emmanuel had come. Although Matthew probably intended no double meaning, he explained that Joseph awoke and did what the angel had commanded. Mary's predicament and the best of his tradition had awakened him to the new thing God was working in his day.

Planning: 4th Sunday of Advent (A)

By: Lawrence Mick

It is a long standing conundrum: Why has St. Joseph gotten so little attention in the history of Christianity? While devotion to Mary has been wide-spread and long-lasting, Joseph seems largely neglected. It was only in 1962, for example, that his name was included in the Roman Canon (which we now call Eucharistic Prayer I), as a result of a decision by Pope John XXIII. Only in 2013 was he added to Eucharistic Prayers II, III, and IV by Pope Francis. Of course, there are two feasts of St. Joseph in the calendar (March 19 and May 1) and some cultures celebrate the March feast lavishly. But it is hard to deny that Joseph has been shortchanged in our history. We might well wonder how much that imbalance has influenced our culture's view of religion as more of a feminine interest, with the resulting scarcity of men in most parish ministries and even as members of our assemblies.

In the other two cycles of the Lectionary, this Sunday focuses our attention on Mary. Only this year does the Gospel speak at some length about Joseph. Planners, musicians, and preachers might look for ways to reflect this focus and expand parishioners' awareness of Joseph's role in our salvation story. This will not detract from Mary; after all, he was her husband. And she gets plenty of attention this month with

Immaculate Conception and Our Lady of Guadalupe (and the memorial of Juan Diego) and Christmas itself. This is certainly a good day to include a couple of petitions for fathers and step-fathers as they seek to guide their children in the way of the Lord.

Financial Matters: This might be a good time to remind regular parishioners that the calendar this year may put a strain on parish budgets. With Christmas and New Year's Day falling on Sunday, there will be two less opportunities for collections than usual this year. While most parishioners are normally very generous on Christmas, it might help to suggest they also add to their Christmas envelope what they would usually donate on the fourth Sunday of December so that budgets stay on track.

Christmas Preparations: We get a full fourth week of Advent this year, so there should be adequate time to prepare for the big feast and to put up the decorations, etc. Planners might invite all parishioners to join in the decorating, since it should mostly be done on Saturday when most people will be off work. If you do that, consider beginning with a short time of prayer, bringing Advent to a climax for them, and then conclude with a final Advent song like "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel."

Prayers: 4th Sunday of Advent (A)

By: Joan DeMerchant

INTRODUCTION

Doubt and confusion are not unique to us, even in matters essential to our faith. People have long asked for signs from God when they are in turmoil. Joseph's deep question about Mary is the focus of today's Gospel. His moving forward on the strength of answers given in a dream should be a source of deep encouragement for us. Serious questions are not inappropriate; in fact, they can lead to amazing answers and events.

PENITENTIAL ACT

- Lord Jesus, you entered life in an unexpected way: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you came in a situation of question and doubt: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you were embraced in acceptance and love: Lord, have mercy.

PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL

Presider: Friends, though life may be filled with questions, we know we are to pray and care for one another.

Minister: For the church: that it may always be an open, questioning community ... with waiting hearts, we pray

- For world leaders who are willing to ask questions on behalf of peace and justice for all ... with waiting hearts, we pray
- For educational systems that encourage children and youth to be challenging, questioning thinkers ... with waiting hearts, we pray
- For those who struggle with doubt and confusion, especially in matters of faith ... with waiting hearts, we pray
- For those whose parentage is in question; and for foster families and foster family programs ... with waiting hearts, we pray
- For all awaiting the birth of a child; and for those who are in any kind of need in this community ... with waiting hearts, we pray
- For the sick, the dying, and those who have died ... (names)... with waiting hearts, we pray

Presider: God of the confused and doubtful, we ask you to support us when our questions overwhelm us. Show us that you are always in our midst, especially when we are weary and cannot find you. We pray in the name of your Son, Jesus, who came among us in the midst of fear and doubt. Amen.

Advertisement

This story appears in the **Cycle A Sunday Resources** feature series. [View the full series.](#)