

SPIRITUALITY

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Matt 1:23

R/. Alleluia, alleluia.

The virgin shall conceive, and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel.

R/. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel

Matt 1:18-24; L10A

This is how the birth of Jesus
Christ came about.

When his mother Mary was
betrothed to Joseph,
but before they lived
together,
she was found with child
through the Holy Spirit.

Joseph her husband, since he
was a righteous man,
yet unwilling to expose her to
shame,
decided to divorce her
quietly.

Such was his intention when, behold,
the angel of the Lord appeared to
him in a dream and said,
“Joseph, son of David,
do not be afraid to take Mary your
wife into your home.

For it is through the Holy Spirit
that this child has been conceived in
her.

She will bear a son and you are to
name him Jesus,
because he will save his people from
their sins.”

All this took place to fulfill what the
Lord had said through the prophet:
*Behold, the virgin shall conceive
and bear a son,
and they shall name him
Emmanuel,*
which means “God is with us.”

When Joseph awoke,
he did as the angel of the Lord had
commanded him
and took his wife into his home.

Reflecting on the Gospel

On this Fourth and final Sunday of Advent we have a story about Joseph told by Matthew. There are so few stories where Joseph is even named in the New Testament that it is good to read this one carefully. Interestingly, we have no words from Joseph in this story or any other in the New Testament. He is a quiet but righteous man, doing what is right in the sight of God.

Thus, Joseph’s desire to end the relationship with Mary quietly upon finding out that she is with child is in keeping with his character. Technically, Mary could be exposed to the law, which would mean a death sentence. But Joseph is not that kind of person. He is content instead to handle this matter discreetly. Such was his intention before the appearance of an angel in a dream.

As Luke tells the story, an angel by the name of Gabriel appeared to Mary. But in Matthew’s story an unnamed angel appears to Joseph in a dream. The two stories are not necessarily contradictory and, in fact, many find them complementary. But each evangelist is relating his story on its own terms. Neither seems to have been aware of the other. That is, Luke had not read Matthew, and Matthew had not read Luke.

The appearance of an angel in Joseph’s dream is enough to change his mind. He takes his wife into his home in Bethlehem (not Nazareth, as Luke has it). Later the child will be born there, at the home.

Again, this is not Luke’s story of the family in Nazareth going to Bethlehem for the census. Matthew’s story has no census; Joseph and Mary live in their home in Bethlehem where Mary will soon give birth.

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent the stage is set for Christmas morning, the nativity of our Lord. A discreet, quiet man who does what is right in the sight of God has taken the pregnant Mary into his home as his wife. What was a scandal worthy of death under the law has been directed by an angel in a dream into safety and security for the woman and her unborn child. God is doing something new.

Living the Paschal Mystery

“Ready or not here we come” is a phrase repeated often in the game of hide and seek, and it is a phrase appropriate for this Fourth Sunday of Advent. Christmas will be here soon whether we are ready or not. And as Christmas is the celebration of the birth of a child, we see that this phrase is appropriate for that too. Many parents reach a sometimes-startling conclusion that the baby will be here whether they are ready or not.

Our Advent has undoubtedly been spent in preparation. But no matter how much preparation we’ve done, there’s likely more we could do. In the end, the day is going to come whether we are ready or not. Despite all of our planning or lack of thereof, soon the celebration will begin. In these remaining days, let us die to anything that takes our focus and attention away from the reason for the preparation. The Christ Child is about to be born. Life has profound meaning. Ready or not, Christmas is coming.

