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## **Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year A, Catechist**

Submitted by lectionaryadmin on Thu, 07/18/2013 - 20:00

### **Catechist Background and Preparation**

To prepare for this session read all the readings.

Isaiah 7:10-14

Psalms 24:1-2, 3-4, 5-6

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-24

Spend a few minutes reflecting on what these readings mean for you today. Was there a particular reading that appealed to you? Was there a word or image that engaged you?

Read the Word in Liturgy and Catholic Doctrine sections. These give you background on what you will be doing this session. Read over the session outline and make it your own. Check to see what materials you will need for the session.

## **The Word in Liturgy**

Divine messages figure prominently in today's readings. In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah speaks to Ahaz, the king of Judah, on behalf of God. The context is that of state turmoil in the face of possible foreign invasion. The northern kingdom, Israel, has allied with Syria in hopes of fending off the Assyrians. When they attempt to enlist the support of Judah, however, Isaiah counsels King Ahaz to ally with no one, but trust God alone. This advice proves difficult for Ahaz to accept, frightened as he is by the great powers around him. His reluctance to ask for a sign (covered up by a pious suggestion that he does not wish to tempt God) suggests his fear of being drawn further into the counsels of Isaiah. To abandon political and military alliances no doubt seemed like madness. To trust God alone and refuse other forms of security represented a great risk to his kingdom and himself.

The sign the prophet gives him is the birth of a child to a young girl. (The Hebrew word for young girl was later translated into the Greek word for virgin. This Greek translation from about 150 b.c., the Septuagint, would have been known by Jesus and his contemporaries.) The name of the child is highly significant: Immanuel, which means "God is with us." The fulfillment of this sign was expected to occur within a short time and would point to the truth of the prophet's word from God. The king's wife, or someone in his harem, would become pregnant, and this would indicate that the king's line would continue and God would protect the kingdom. Christians, however, in looking back on this passage, saw in this sign a prefiguration of the virgin birth of Jesus. Through the mystery of the Incarnation "God is with us," and one of his traditional titles indeed has been Emmanuel (the Greek spelling for the Hebrew Immanuel).

Joseph, in today's Gospel, also receives a summons to trust God and be obedient in fearful circumstances. In first-century Palestine, betrothal was considered binding, and even though the couple did not yet live together, any sexual infidelity was regarded as adultery and was punishable



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by death. Mary's unexpected pregnancy was more than a cause for social embarrassment. It was a breach of sacred law. In his decision to divorce Mary quietly, Joseph's concern for the law was combined with mercy. Matthew then shows that, like the patriarch Joseph (whose interpretation of dreams played a significant role in the fate of the chosen people), this Joseph changed the course of his plans because of a communication he received in a dream. The figure of Joseph is crucial to Matthew's infancy narrative. His genealogy establishes Joseph in the line of David. His acceptance of Mary thus gives Jesus legal paternity and human lineage going back to David. His acceptance of the message of the angel (an annunciation) shows the child is the Son of God.

The name Jesus, from Joshua, means "God saves," indicating the child's mission. The miraculous events surrounding Jesus' conception and birth are elaborate commentaries on the identity and mission of the adult Christ we meet in the rest of the gospel.

## Catholic Doctrine

### *Virgin Birth*

To say that the phrase "virgin birth" describes something unique is to engage in understatement. But that is precisely the suggestion, and more, which is being made by the Catholic Church when it espouses this teaching. It is important to note that while many people mistakenly associate this phrase with the birth of the Virgin Mary, virgin birth actually describes the entrance of Jesus into this world. The Spirit is responsible for Jesus' conception in the womb of Mary. The virgin birth, thus, is a unique manifestation of God's power and grace breaking into the world in an almost unfathomable mystery, rich in significance for believers. What is that significance?

To understand the significance of this mystery, one must see how the Church has articulated this teaching. This mystery has been more precisely described in three distinct aspects, that is, Mary retained her virginity (1) before, (2) during (or in), and (3) after the birth of Jesus. Each of these specific aspects illuminates a reality significant for the Church. The first aspect, virginal conception, underscores the core belief surrounding the Christian faith that the Messiah has only one father, his heavenly Father. Therefore, Jesus is truly God. He has an earthly mother, Mary, and therefore is also truly human. The second aspect, Mary remaining a virgin even during the birth itself, relies on the implication of Matthew 1:25 and underscores Mary's bodily integrity and her having been spared the pains of childbearing.

The concept of virgin birth is seen by the faithful as revealing the unique, miraculous action of God in the savior's entrance into this world, the intimate relationship between God and God's Son sharing in the same divine nature, and Mary's wholehearted cooperation in the plan of redemption. It has nothing to do with modern understandings of biology and everything to do with God's loving miracles astounding us and saving us.

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