

Isaiah 7:10-14

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

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-24

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 18, 2022



REFLECTION

Joseph was in a difficult situation. Mary was his betrothed, which was a much more serious and binding thing than a modern engagement. However, she was pregnant, and Joseph knew he wasn't the father.

The consequences for Mary could have been severe. Women who had affairs could be put to death by stoning or be left to beg or prostitute themselves to survive. Instead, Joseph decided he would divorce Mary quietly. The child would be assumed to be his, and Mary's reputation—and life—would be spared.

In our current, lightning-fast “callout” culture, it is often easier to expose someone than it is to find a quiet, measured response. Public vengeance is exciting, thrilling, and satisfying, but ultimately destructive. Vengeance can end relationships, livelihoods, and lives. Mercy offers the possibility of new beginnings. Joseph's mercy gave him space to hear the angel's message and learn that God had a plan for Mary and himself; a plan that was greater than he could have ever imagined.



ACTION

How can you create more space for mercy in your interactions with people? Some suggestions: Give yourself permission to step away or turn off your phone when you are angry. Avoid conversations about emotional topics late at night or when you are hungry, tired, or overwhelmed. Say a prayer to the Holy Spirit for help navigating difficult conversations. Can you think of other strategies? Pick one or more and try applying it to your life. What happens when you give yourself more breathing space?



The Nativity Story

QUESTIONS

- ❖ What do today's readings teach you about the Christian life?
- ❖ What makes Joseph a “righteous man”? What is the difference between a righteous person and a self-righteous person?
- ❖ What would it look like to give God space in your decision making process?



December 18, 2022

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

LECTIONARY #10A

Isaiah 7:10-14

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

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-24

Prepare for the Word

The following elements may be used by the catechist, teacher, or youth minister to prepare to facilitate today's session with teens. You may integrate this information into the reflection and discussion on today's readings.

Leader's Context

Within a span of ten days, we read both versions of the annunciation: Mary's experience in Luke on December 8, and today, for the Fourth Sunday of Advent we hear Joseph's experience from Matthew. Remind the young people about the who, what, when, and why of the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception as compared to what we're celebrating today: announcing the impending arrival of Emmanuel—God with us. The details Matthew includes in his Gospel emphasize that this has been God's plan all along, as foretold by the prophets. Isaiah's prophecy—made seven hundred years before Jesus—is quoted within the passage. Although he does not speak at all in the passage, attention is given to the faith, righteousness, and mercy of Joseph because he has an important role to play.

Q FOCUS: *Joseph's virtuous character and role in the impending arrival of Emmanuel.*

Liturgical Calendar Connection

In this last week of Advent, we turn our attention to the "O Antiphons." Since at least the eighth century, the Church has traditionally sung each "O Antiphon" at Evening Prayer, or Vespers, in the seven days before Christmas, from December 17 to the 23. An antiphon is a short ritual chant, like the words sung by the cantor during the Alleluia. The seven "O Antiphons" are notable for their beautiful imagery, inspiring both visual artwork and hymns such as "O Come, O Come,

Emmanuel." Theologically, each reference an Old Testament prophecy of God's promise for the Messiah, and within each, the word, "come" expresses the longing desire for fulfillment of those promises. The Church prays the "O Antiphons" each day this week with joyful anticipation of Emmanuel—God with us.

Church Teaching Connection

"Joseph trusts God totally. . . . It was precisely this unshakable trust in God that enabled him to accept a humanly difficult and, in a certain sense, incomprehensible situation. Joseph understands, in faith, that the child born in Mary's womb is not his child, but the Son of God, and he, Joseph, will be its guardian, fully assuming its earthly paternity. The example of this gentle and wise man exhorts us to lift up our gaze and push it further" (Pope Francis, Angelus Message, December 22, 2019).

Hear the Word

Use this resource, a Lectionary, or a Bible to proclaim the reading. The book should be held reverently or placed on a lectern. If possible, light a candle that is placed near where the Gospel will be proclaimed. Gesture for teens to stand.

Gospel Acclamation

Use the same musical setting that is used in your parish or at school Masses. Teens may help with music and proclaim the Gospel.

Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel

Matthew 1:18-24

Reader: A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew.

All: Glory to you, O Lord.

All make the Sign of the Cross on their forehead, lips, and heart.

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.

Reader: The Gospel of the Lord.

All: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Everyone may be seated.

Reflect on the Word

When beginning the reflection and discussion about today's readings, first refer to the handout for today. Ask teens what they learned about themselves and about Christian discipleship from performing the action for the week and journaling. Ask teens about the readings of the day: What struck them? What do they think the readings mean? How do the readings affect their own lives? Then begin the following reflection:

► Think of a success you have recently experienced. How would your explanation be different if you were speaking to family members versus friends?

Out of the four Gospels, only two tell us the story of the annunciation. Luke tells Mary's side while Matthew tells Joseph's. More than he-said/she-said, Matthew includes details that specifically resonate with his Jewish audience, like referencing the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy and using the title "Jesus Christ." Contemporary Christians are so used to referring to Jesus in this way that many think Christ is his last name. "Christ" is Greek for "the anointed one"; the Hebrew word "messiah" also means the same. Using that title makes the opening line read more like a thesis statement than a topic sentence: "Jesus is the long-awaited Jewish messiah and this is how his birth came about."

► Isaiah's prophecy about the virgin birth was made about seven hundred years before the time of Jesus. What is the longest you have ever waited with joyful anticipation?

As a righteous, faithful Jew, Joseph knew of God's promise to save his people, and he trusted in God. Joseph would be familiar with the prophecies that said the Messiah would come from the line of David (of which he was) as well as the promise of Emmanuel—God with us. What Joseph didn't know was that he would have a specific role in helping God fulfill this promise.

► How do you think Joseph's faith helped him do as the angel commanded?

Referring to Joseph as righteous meant that he carefully obeyed Jewish law. The scandal of Mary's pregnancy would have ruined Joseph's reputation. By all appearances, Joseph had every right to be insulted and offended by the discovery that Mary was pregnant.

► When you are "wronged" by someone, how do you respond?

Before he even knew the whole story, Joseph chose to practice mercy. In a situation where many people would feel entitled to seek revenge, Joseph was unwilling to do anything to hurt Mary. Responding with mercy left space for God to act and to invite Joseph to cooperate with his grace. Giving Joseph the responsibility of naming the child was the cultural equivalent of adoption in ancient Israel. Joseph wasn't given a task from a to-do list; he was given a role in the life of the savior of the world by God.

► In this passage, we hear about Joseph's thoughts, intentions, and actions, but we don't hear his words. What can you imagine Joseph saying in response to this unusual and complicated situation? What conversation might he have had with Mary after this revelation?

Wrapping It Up

Consider these points to conclude the discussion and reflection. Integrate the thoughts and ideas that surfaced during the discussion as well as the "Church Teaching Connection" on page 88.

Joseph's faith and trust in God enabled him to act.

Choosing to respond to a difficult situation with mercy leaves room for God's direction.

Joseph's role as husband and parent helps God fulfill the promise of the long-awaited savior.

Act on the Word

Virtue Charades

For this activity, you will need pens and thirty pieces of pre-cut slips of paper (large enough for the teens to write a word or phrase), as well as two small bags or boxes to collect the charade prompts (one for each team). Divide the slips of paper into two equal piles. You will need a way to keep time and keep score. Consider offering candy as prizes for the winning team.

Play a fun game of charades with the teens, one that focuses on action without words. Begin by drawing attention to how Joseph's virtuous character enabled him to do God's will and welcome God's presence in the world. Joseph gives us an example of being a person of character and action even though he never said any words.

Divide the young people into two teams. Challenge each team to come up with fifteen different virtues or attributes which reflect the quality of character that, like Joseph, a person who does God's will and welcomes God's presence in the world would practice.

Give them a few minutes to discuss and write each virtuous word (or phrase) on a separate piece

of paper. Only offer examples if needed, such as faith, mercy, love, respect. Encourage them to use one-word descriptions to facilitate an easier transition to charades. As they finish, ask them to fold each paper in half twice and deposit them into their team's small bag or box. Ensure that each team has an equal number of virtue-charade prompts in their bag.

Gather everyone back to the large group, but have the teens remain in their teams. Announce that you will now play charades using each other's virtue-words as the prompts, with only actions, not words (nor sound effects). Depending on time and space, you can have the competition run simultaneously (with the first to guess all the virtues as the winner) or have each team take turns earning points for the most correct guesses within a one-minute timeframe.

Conclude by emphasizing that by practicing virtuous behavior, we become people who do God's will and welcome God's presence into the world.

Closing Prayer

Lord God,
you gave Joseph the courage
to trust in the word of an angel.
Guide our steps today
and lead us along the paths
you have chosen for us
so that we may welcome your Son
into the world anew.
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

For Next Sunday

To help teens prepare for next Sunday's Mass, print, email, or share on a blog or social media the handout found on the next page. The JPG and PDF files are available at www.ltp.org/lwgr. Encourage teens to attend Mass with family or friends.