

**INTRODUCTION** (*Isaiah 11,1-10; Romans 15,4-9; Matthew 3,1-12*)

The historical setting for today's first reading goes back 700 years before Christ. It was a time of great distress for Israel. The Assyrians had literally annihilated all of the area north of Jerusalem - an area known as the northern kingdom. It was very likely Jerusalem would be the next victim of the Assyrian army. It would be similar to a hostile nation enslaving and killing every person who lived in the northern half of the United States and destroying every home and business in the same area. In spite of all this, we hear Isaiah in today's first reading proclaiming a message of hope – a promise of great blessings to those who have remained faithful to God. A great king, filled with the Spirit of God, would usher in these blessings. This ruler would come from the royal house of David – that is what Isaiah meant when he identifies this leader as “a shoot that would sprout from the stump of Jesse.” Jesse was the father of King David, as I'm sure you all know, and the kingship in Jerusalem was barely surviving as the word “stump” indicates.

**HOMILY:** Our homily last week could be summarized in one word: “prepare.” Too many people think this means we should shop a lot, decorate our house, prepare big meals for relatives and friends, send cards. These are not bad things. But that's not what the Scriptures are talking about when it says “prepare.” The advertising media does a pretty good job telling us to prepare in the various ways I've mentioned. The Scriptures are asking us to prepare for a coming of Christ that is yet to take place. Isaiah describes this future king who would not arrive for many years. His name would be Emmanuel – a name meaning God with us, or God is with us. He would be filled with all the gifts of the Spirit of God. The peace his coming will bring will be unimaginable. As we just heard, Isaiah had to describe it poetically: animals and people, the wolf and lamb, the calf and the lion, and poisonous snakes and little children would all live in harmony on this earth. It is a beautiful image and only God knows how all this can happen - and when it will happen. In the gospel, John the Baptist told us it will be soon: “the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (A better translation would be: “the kingdom of heaven is fast approaching.) John the Baptist's food and clothing mark him as a prophet. Eating bugs doesn't seem very appealing, but it is still a common item in the diet of Arabs today. They are nutritious. Vitamin content is high. People who like to predict what life on this planet will be like in the future have written that as the population of the world keeps going higher, locusts will be part of our diet too.

I have strayed from the main topic of our liturgy which is repentance and the baptisms of John. John's baptism is interpreted a little differently than Christian baptism. Christian baptism removes sin; whereas, John the Baptist preached repentance. John's baptism was given as a sign that the sinner had repented. Once a person decided to live in a righteous way as God wants us to, then they received baptism of their body as a symbol that their soul was made clean (by their decision to live a righteous life.)

All this goes back to the words of the Baptist in today's gospel (and also the exact same message of Jesus, in the next chapter): “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is fast

approaching.” It is something we need to prepare for. If we didn’t need to prepare, why would the Baptist, and why would God’s Son himself, say that we should? The definition of prepare is “to get ready for something,” or “to provide what is needed” as in preparing to go somewhere, or to complete something as in “preparing a meal.” In simplest terms, it means to do something to achieve some purpose. We can’t just claim to be part of some group - like saying I’m a Catholic or I’m a Christian or I’m a spiritual person. It’s obvious from the preaching of the Baptist, the Jews thought because they were descendants of Abraham, they were automatically saved. John the Baptist said JUST claiming membership in some organization is not going to win us any points. We have to be an active member of the organization; we have to do our part to help fulfill its purpose. John the Baptist said, for example, we have to be like a fruit tree that is productive. Thus we have to live a good life and produce good works. The Book of Revelation tells us our good works are the only thing we will take with us when the Lord calls us to himself. Besides buying gifts and sending cards and baking and decorating, how are we preparing to meet Christ when he comes again? One example - Have we done anything to meet him at today’s holy Mass?

### **Feast of the Immaculate Conception - A Cycle**

**December 8, 2016**

*(Genesis 3,9-15.20; Ephesians 1,3-6.11-12; Luke 1,26-38)*

We just heard the story of how Jesus was conceived; how through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Son of God took on our human flesh through Mary’s willingness to carry him and nurse him and raise him. She did not conceive Jesus through the love of a husband but through the special love of God. Because this is what today’s gospel is all about, many people think this is what today’s feast of the Immaculate Conception is about. But it’s not. Today’s feast is about when Mary was conceived. It is only fitting that the mother of the Son of God would be untouched by any stain of sin. The reason we hear today’s gospel on the feast of the Immaculate Conception is because of the greeting of the angel: “hail full of grace.” From the first instant of Mary’s life within her own mother, she was without sin; she was fully open to God’s grace.

In order to better understand what this means, we are told the story of our first parents who also came into this world free from sin. They lived in paradise - a symbol of abundance of all God’s graces and blessings. Although God blessed them as he did, God also had the power to make demands on them. That’s what is meant by God’s command that they not eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They realized that God was greater than them, and they were envious. A little creature recognized their envy, and told them that if they did what God forbade them to do, they would be as powerful as God. They bought that lie, and once they did, they were filled with shame and guilt and remorse. They lost most of the wonderful gifts and blessings God had given them. Having lost so many of God’s blessings, they could not pass them on to their children. Therefore, we are born into a sinful race having inherited the loss of God’s grace. That loss sticks to us like a germ or a defective gene.

Mary was especially favored; she was created to be the mother of Jesus, and she was created without sin. Not only was she free of sin and full of grace from the first moment

of her existence, but throughout her whole life, she was full of grace. On every occasion her attitude toward God was “I am the handmaid of the Lord, let it be done to me according to your word.” If we were to translate the Greek literally, Mary called herself the slave of God who is her Master.”

That is why Mary is the Immaculate Conception and that is today’s feast. Adam and Eve’s sin (what we call Original Sin) did not touch her and she always responded positively whenever God asked anything of her. Even though Mary got a head start in a life of holiness, we are not excluded from being close to God. Through baptism we are filled with God’s grace and life and we too can grow in holiness by learning to say “yes” to God when he asks things of us like Mary did.

**3rd Sunday of Advent - A Cycle**

**December 11, 2016**

**INTRODUCTION:** (*Isaiah 35,1-6a.10; James 5,7-10; Matthew 11,2-11*) Today’s first reading most probably comes from the fifty-year period when God’s captive people were exiled in Babylon. (This was in the sixth century BC.) No doubt the people were depressed over the loss of their freedom, their homeland, their temple and their personal property. It is likely they had no hope of ever being set free. The prophet Isaiah had a more optimistic view of things. He describes for them a bright future. God would bring them home. God would turn their desert, arid lands, into gardens bursting with vegetation and beauty. Those who were weak, sick, blind and lame would be freed of their affliction. God’s people would be crowned with everlasting joy. Isaiah could not have given a more beautiful picture of paradise. The picture Isaiah presents is not here yet – but it’s on the way. It begins with the work and the teaching of Jesus. St. James tells us in the second reading not to become impatient because it’s still a little ways off. He encourages us to be patient and steadfast in our faith.

**HOMILY:** Fifty-two years ago, when I was just beginning my ministry as a young priest, when the Masses were all in Latin, the opening hymn began with the word “Gaudete in Domino semper, iterum dico Gaudete!” which means “Rejoice in the Lord, always, again I say rejoice.” Paul was writing this to his favorite community - the Philippians. Paul was not sitting on a beach somewhere sipping on a glass of fine wine, with a few friends, watching the sun go down, when he wrote this. He was in prison; indeed, he was in danger of death. His situation was not one that a normal person would have anything to rejoice about. In the next verse, Paul tells us why he has reason to rejoice and why the recipients of his letter should rejoice. He says “the Lord is near.”

Indeed the Lord is always near for us, too, and it’s not just because Christmas is only two weeks away. Each time we pray, each time we come to Mass, each time we perform a kind act for someone, the Lord is near. The Church thinks it is especially appropriate to be reminded of these words of Paul when we get this close to Christmas.

Notice, Paul tells us to rejoice as if it is a command. Even when things are not going well, we do have some control over whether we want to sit around and feel sorry for ourselves or whether we choose to take a more positive view of things. I’m sure any one

of us can name ten dozen things that can pull us down and depress us. If we choose to constantly focus on any of them, it can destroy us. Paul is saying, “focus on Jesus. He is near.” He was near to Paul in prison. He is near to us. One of my favorite lines in Scripture is: “for those who love God, everything works out for the best.” The more I am hurting, the stronger I have to believe it.

Perhaps John the Baptist was having a hard time of it while sitting in Herod’s prison. He was doing God’s work and preaching God’s word, and King Herod didn’t like it. So Herod got John thrown into prison. We don’t know for sure why he asked whether Jesus was the Messiah, the one who is to come. Maybe he thought if Jesus is the Savior, why doesn’t he get me out of here. He’s doing good things for others, why isn’t he doing something for me?

Maybe this is where the second reading comes in. St. James tells us to be patient. God has his own schedule and it doesn’t always match up with ours. It comes down to the fact that he’s in charge and we are not. We can ask for what we need, but he has the last word. His last word will always be for our happiness.

That is what Isaiah tells God’s exiled people in our first reading. Let us hear it once again: “Those whom the Lord has ransomed will return and enter Zion singing, crowned with everlasting joy; they will meet with joy and gladness, sorrow and mourning will flee.”

#### **Fourth Sunday of Advent – A Cycle**

**December 18, 2016**

*[Jerry preached for me in 2016]*

**INTRODUCTION** – (*Isaiah 7,10-14; Romans 1,1-7; Matthew 1, 18-24*) Our first reading takes us back 700 years before Christ to the Middle East. It was as complicated a political situation then as it is today. There are four nations and their kings involved in this complicated story. Tiglath-pileser III was king over the Assyrians. The Assyrians were the dominant power in the Middle East. They were an especially cruel and powerful nation whose capital was located in what is today northern Iraq. Ahaz was king in Jerusalem, and that’s the only name you will need to remember. There were two more kings whose lands were north of Jerusalem. These two kings from the north decided they wanted to go to war against Assyria and they wanted King Ahaz in Jerusalem to join them. Ahaz refused, so the two northern kings were going to attack Jerusalem to replace Ahaz with someone who would go along with their scheme. Ahaz decided to call on Assyria for protection. This is where our first reading comes in - an extremely important passage in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. Isaiah warned Ahaz not to get involved with Assyria for they were too powerful. Isaiah promised, “God would keep the king and Jerusalem safe.” The two kings from the north would soon be destroyed. Ahaz did not have enough faith in God. Isaiah tried to offer Ahaz a sign that he should trust God. Ahaz, in a phony display of humility, protested, but Isaiah offered a sign anyway. For Ahaz, the sign would be that he would soon have a son to succeed him as king. He had no offspring at this time for he had recently sacrificed his

only son to the Canaanite God, Moloch. This future son of King Ahaz would be called by the symbolic name Emmanuel for he would be a sign that God was with his people. God was faithful to his word. Ahaz did have a son who succeeded him and his son turned out to be a good leader. Almost eight centuries later, St. Matthew saw in this promise of Isaiah a greater depth of meaning as we will hear in today's gospel. He saw that Jesus fulfilled this promise perfectly by being born of a virgin and by being a sign to us that God is with us.

**HOMILY** – Bob forgot to give his wife a gift or bring her flowers on their wedding anniversary. His wife was really angry. He asked how he could make things right with her. She said with Christmas around the corner, she wanted a gift that would go from 0 to 200 in six seconds. So on Christmas he told her the gift was in the garage. She ran down excitedly, opened the garage door and there in the garage was a brand new, brightly shining, chrome plated bathroom scale. Bob hasn't been seen or heard from since.

It seems to be a guy thing to forget anniversaries. But anniversaries are very important. We are preparing to celebrate the anniversary of the birth of Jesus, an anniversary that people have celebrated for about 17 centuries. Both Matthew and Luke describe for us some of the events leading up to the birth of Jesus. Since most of our gospels this year will be from Matthew's gospel, we listen to what Matthew tells us about Jesus' birth. Matthew's account of Jesus' birth and the events that led up to it does not lend itself to beautiful works of art or musical compositions as does Luke's infancy narrative. We can appreciate Matthew because he tells us what was happening with Joseph, while Luke tells us mostly about Mary. We wish they could have told us more, but these were the traditions they had to work with, so we are grateful for preserving them for us.

Both Matthew and Luke stress the miraculous nature of Jesus' conception and the problems it created for Mary and Joseph. To understand what was happening with Joseph, we have to know that for the Jews, marriage took place in two stages. First there was a formal exchange of consent before witnesses. The second step was at a later time (usually about a year later) when the groom took the bride to his home. Even before they came to live together, legally they were considered married. Problems arose when Mary conceived Jesus before they lived together. Joseph didn't know what to do, at least not until the angel told him, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home." Of course, he obeyed the message of the angel. Until the angel spoke to him, we do not know what Joseph was thinking. I can't imagine that Mary didn't tell him what was happening, but whether Joseph didn't believe what she told him and he thought she had been unfaithful, or whether he did believe her and he felt unworthy to be part of such a holy event, we are not told. Matthew doesn't give us any insight into Joseph's decision to divorce Mary. Matthew's main intent is to tell us of the miraculous nature of Jesus' birth and that Joseph had a necessary part to play as he was "son of David" (the title the angel gave him in his dream). Legally he would be Jesus' father; he would give Jesus his name and, legally, Jesus would belong to the royal house of David. Jesus would fulfill the Messianic expectations of God's people, and he would fulfill the ancient prophecy of Nathan, the prophet who told David 1,000

years earlier that “God would establish the throne of David’s kingdom forever.” (II Samuel, 7,13)

Our gospel is interesting in that it confirms the miraculous conception of Jesus and it gives us a little more insight into the events that surrounded Jesus’ birth. In addition, our gospel has a message for us today. It shows us how our lives can take a sudden turn. We have our life planned out and we’re going along peacefully day by day doing what we had intended and then, without warning, everything is turned upside down. Perhaps it is a sudden sickness or death, a financial loss, a new child within the family, a new in-law or whatever. (*thoughts from Biblical Meditations for Advent and the Christmas Season by Carroll Stuhlmueller, pg 70*) We are reminded we are not in charge and we have to fall back on our faith that God loves us and will help us get through whatever situation we are in. Only God saves (which is what the name “Jesus” means: Yahweh saves). Amen.

## **Christmas**

**December 25, 2016**

About 800 years ago, there lived in Italy a young man with a wealthy father. The young man loved to party and spend money. He decided he would make a name for himself and join the army. But he was captured and spent time as a prisoner of war. After his release, he suffered from poor health for a while until he heard our Lord speaking to him. Our Lord wanted him to give up everything and live in poverty and simplicity as Jesus did. So the man did. Often he would have to beg people for their leftovers in order to have food to eat. Everyone thought he was crazy. One Christmas he wanted to show his friends how Jesus, although he was Son of God, gave up everything and lived in simplicity and poverty in order to teach us the way to heaven. This man, Francis, made a Christmas crib at his church to demonstrate Jesus’ love for us. Thanks to the spiritual genius of St. Francis, we have a crib each year to help us visualize the simplicity of Jesus’ birth.

This week, as our maintenance men were preparing the crib, before the statues were put in place and it was completely empty, I was impressed with the simplicity of what was just an old shack. People could put their animals there at night to keep them safe. Now if you go to Bethlehem, the guide there would take you into a cave and say this is where Jesus was born. Sometimes, however, people built their homes connected to a cave. Whether it was a cave or a shack or a combination of the two, Jesus was not born in a very fancy place. Since Mary was about to have a baby, she probably preferred to have some privacy even if she had to share the same room with the animals.

St. Luke gives us precious few details about Jesus’ birth. Luke mentions Caesar Augustus who was a Roman Emperor for 41 years. I think Luke is trying to contrast Augustus, famous as a peaceful monarch, with Jesus who comes to us as the eternal king of peace. Knowing, however, that Jesus was born shortly before the death of Herod the Great, the Jewish king, gives us a good idea about the date of Jesus’ birth. Scholars suggest Jesus was born sometime between 4 and 6 BC. According to the

gospels of Matthew and Luke and the writing of the prophet Micah, a prophet who lived about 700 years before Christ, Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Bethlehem connects Jesus with King David, for David came from Bethlehem and the Messiah was to be a descendant of David. Bethlehem also connects Jesus with the Eucharist because Bethlehem means "house of bread." I recently came across a beautiful painting by Salvador Dali showing Mary praying before Jesus was born. Through a window in her body, Jesus could be seen in her womb. Through a window in Jesus body, there could be seen a half loaf of bread. In one picture, the artist was telling us if we can believe God can become a human being, why do some people have problems believing that God can become bread and wine in order to feed us with his own flesh and blood?

As we hear Luke's account about Jesus' birth, Luke stresses that the first people to know about his birth were the shepherds. Now shepherds were smelly and dirty and they had a bad reputation as being dishonest people. Jesus always showed a special concern for the poor and the outcasts and sinners. According to Luke, the shepherds were considered to be such people, and they were the first to hear the good news of Jesus' birth.

Mary wrapped Jesus' little body with cloth bands - an indication of Mary's care for Jesus. There was nothing unusual about wrapping a child in cloth bands - any mother in that culture would have treated a new-born child in the same way. What was unusual about Jesus' birth were the angels. An angel announced the Savior, the Messiah had been born. The shepherds were to look for him. The sign they had found him would be that he was lying in a trough that held food for animals. That would have been an unusual sign.

The only thing Luke tells us about Mary was she thought about all that had happened and treasured these thoughts in her heart. How she felt otherwise - tired, happy, hurting, we do not know. Did she have a midwife to help her? We don't know. I'm sure Joseph was as supportive as it was possible for him to be.

Just as Luke doesn't tell us much about Jesus' birth, he doesn't tell us much about Jesus, but that's all right, because he told us a lot about Jesus when the angel announced to Mary that she would be Jesus' mother, nine months earlier. He told Mary (and he told us at the same time) that Jesus would be great and would be hailed as Son of the Most High. He would be king of the house of Jacob and of his kingship there will be no end. His conception would happen through the Spirit of God. Thus, Jesus would be holy and would be called Son of God. What Mary alone knew at the Annunciation, we now pray that someday the whole world will know.

I need to clarify one thing: Jesus didn't come just to save the poor and the outcast and the sinners. Matthew tells us Jesus came also to save the wise and learned and the people at the top of the social ladder. Matthew tells us about the magi who traveled hundreds of miles to honor and to offer gifts to this great king whom we honor today. There is a lovely one act opera called Amahl and the Night Visitors that depicts that search of the magi. If you ever get to watch it or see it on TV, you will enjoy it. I might

mention, my friend and our own parishioner, Dr. Sammarco played the lead role as Amahl right after the opera had been written 65 years ago. Of course he was younger then.

I wish everyone here all the blessings Christ came to bring to us: peace, love, joy, strength in time of temptation and comfort in time of sadness. Amen.