

## Homily for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year A

December 18, 2022

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

*First Reading: Isaiah 7:10-14 (The virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, who is "God with us.")*

*Responsory: Psalm 24 (Let the Lord enter; he is the king of glory.)*

*Second Reading: Romans 1:1-7 (We have received the grace of apostleship.)*

*Gospel: Matthew 1:18-24 (Joseph takes Mary into his home.)*

Try to put yourself in Joseph's shoes. He is betrothed to a lovely young lady, who appears to be the sweetest, most virtuous person that he has ever met in his entire life. She's as pure and innocent as they come. As impossible as it may seem, she appears to be utterly immaculate, without a single moral flaw or blemish. And now, they're on the brink of beginning their new life together. Following the traditional Jewish custom, they have already been married *legally*, but they continue to live apart as they await the *second* phase of marriage, when the groom will go to the bride's home and ceremonially escort her to *his* home, where the great wedding feast will take place. From that moment on, they will live together as husband and wife.

During this period of betrothal, Joseph discovers to his horror that his sweet, innocent bride-to-be is *pregnant*! He knows for a fact that the baby isn't his. So, there's only one conclusion to be drawn: he has completely misjudged Mary. The woman he thought to be an immaculate virgin is actually a scheming adulteress! His world must have been completely shattered. Frankly, it's a wonder that he was willing to divorce Mary quietly. Even though she had humiliated him, he still wanted to protect her from public shame.

Matthew tells us that Joseph was intending to move ahead with the divorce when the angel of the Lord appeared to him and announced that the conception of this child was *not* the result of sin, as everyone would have presumed. Rather, it was the result of an extraordinary *grace*. The Lord had chosen Mary to bear the Son of God, and he had chosen Joseph to be her husband, and to raise this child as his own.

Notice that the angel does not *order* Joseph to take Mary into his home. The angel says, "*Do not be afraid* to take Mary your wife into your home." The Lord does not take the decision out of Joseph's hands and coerce him into doing something against his will. The angel merely explains what has happened and why. This was to fulfill the prophecy that we heard in the first reading: "The virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel." Mary was now carrying "God with us" in her womb, because she had already consented to *her* role in the divine plan. But, hers was not the only essential role, nor was this prophecy the only one that needed to be fulfilled by the birth of Christ. The Christ child was destined to be a "Son of David," meaning that his *father* had to belong to the house of King David. Just as Mary's consent enabled one key prophecy to be fulfilled, so Joseph's consent was required for a whole host of other prophecies about the Messiah's lineage to be fulfilled.

Here's a scary thought... What if Joseph had said "No"? What then? Surely, the divine plan for the salvation of the world could not be thwarted by one person refusing to play along.

But, that doesn't mean that God took away Joseph's or Mary's free will. It means that God had to choose *Mary's husband* with the same care that he chose Mary, so that both could accept their extraordinary and unique vocation, for our sake. The salvation of the entire human race depended on *both of them, of their own free will*, saying "Yes" to God, and then following through on their commitments.

We also have free will to respond to the Lord's call with a wholehearted "Yes," a defiant "No," or something in between. And, make no mistake – *all of us* are called. St. Paul says that through Christ we have received "the grace of apostleship." To be an *apostle* means to be *sent out* on a mission. So, Paul is not talking about the grace by which Christ has saved us, but rather, the grace by which *we bring others to Christ*, so that he can save them, too. It's far easier to be a *disciple*, that is, one who *follows*. One can follow the way of Christ while meekly hiding in the shadows, avoiding any risks, and not exposing oneself to criticism or the possibility of rejection. An apostle must be bolder. He cannot play it safe. He must go to places where the message of Christ needs to be proclaimed, places where the Gospel may not be well-received, and the messenger may face ridicule and hostility. Most reasonable people would say "No" to that sort of call, *unless* they had received the grace of apostleship. We need a particular grace of the Holy Spirit to go where the Lord sends us and proclaim our faith in the midst of a people who may not share our beliefs or our priorities.

The Advent season is an especially challenging time to be a Christian apostle. There is perhaps no other time of year when the clash between the sacred and the secular is so extreme. We're now three weeks into our month-long journey through the season. We have been slowly, meditatively approaching the celebration of the Lord's Nativity, contemplating the various meanings of the "coming of the Lord," so that when Christmas Day arrives, we'll be ready to embark on the *second* leg of our journey, contemplating the significance of the *Incarnation* throughout the Christmas season. Meanwhile, in the world around us, radio stations and retail stores started playing Christmas carols about two months ago, and advertisers have spent the past month desperately trying to equate the "Christmas spirit" with buying expensive luxury items that nobody really needs. And, when Christmas Day arrives, all of this will come to a crashing halt, as if the Christmas season is over, when it's actually just beginning.

A Christian *disciple* could try to shut out all the noise and just follow Christ's way privately. But, Christian *apostles* should feel compelled to say or do something more public, to keep the spirit of Advent and Christmas alive, for themselves and others. For example, we might strive to remain joyful and cheerful and focused on the true meaning of the season, while others are running around frantically, stressed out over Christmas traditions that seem rather shallow and devoid of meaning. In our shopping, we might try to focus less on the quantity and cost of gifts, and more on the *message* that they will send to the one who receives them. In our holiday celebrations, we might strive to make *thankfulness* the centerpiece, and *love* the spirit which binds family and friends together. In these last days of Advent, let us fix our gaze *even more intently* on Christ and his coming – the true "reason for the season."