

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 4th SUNDAY OF ADVENT (A)
Isaiah 7: 10-14 Psalm 24 Romans 1: 1-7 Matthew 1: 18-24
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The first reading will sound confusing to our congregations this weekend. If we attempt to hear the text as listeners in the pews, we will see the problem. The text is brief and out of context. We hear God addressing Ahaz (listeners are sure to wonder who Ahaz is!) telling him to “Ask for a sign from the Lord, your God; let it be deep as the netherworld, or high as the sky!” It sounds like Ahaz should ask for some kind of proof or confirmation from God; the more spectacular the better. Yet one can hear the questions arising from the pews, “We thought we weren’t supposed to test God by asking for signs and wonders. Aren’t we supposed to live on faith? Didn’t Jesus criticize his opponents who wanted signs as proof that he was from God?”

When a text like this one “comes out of the blue” and I think it will baffle the congregation, I sometimes precede the reading by giving a few lines of background to help the listeners’ comprehension. What follows in this reflection, might encourage the preacher to actually preach from the Isaiah reading (a good idea in Advent) or, at least, to suggest material helpful for the introduction to the reading.

Why is God “weary” with the people? Since the reading seems so contrary to what we have been taught about looking for signs from God, the prophet must be addressing a serious wrong that requires a break with the usual. Hence the demand put to Ahaz, “Ask for a sign....” Ahaz was king of Judah in the 8th century B.C.E., and, in the prophet’s eyes, he was a miserable failure. Ahaz had chosen alliances with foreign powers over fidelity to God. He had placed a pagan altar in the temple upon which he offered the sacrifice of his son (cf. 2 Kings). Isaiah wants Ahaz to ask for a sign of God’s ever-present fidelity to the people. But such a sign might reveal God’s displeasure with the king’s own infidelities and so Ahaz puts up a pretense of not wanting to ask a sign from God.

The prophet wants the king and people to hear the message that God is with the people and will never abandon them. Hence, despite Ahaz’s protestation, the sign

will be given: a young woman will bear a son and on this offspring god's favor will rest. Most immediately, the prophet was probably referring to the birth of Ahaz's son Hezekiah. Since Ahaz had not fulfilled the role of shepherd over God's people, the responsibility to be a king like David would fall upon Hezekiah.

Though Ahaz was morally flawed and not faithful to God, nevertheless, God would not give up on the people and the child, we are told, would be called "Emmanuel"—"God with us." This name sums up a key biblical message that is stated explicitly or implicitly throughout the bible. When Israel entered into covenant with God; escaped slavery from Egypt and later Babylon; faced advancing armies; had to rebuild the devastated country and temple, etc. ---God always gave reassurance, "Fear not, I am with you." Israel's God was truly "Emmanuel." God wanted Ahaz to trust that God would be with him and the people as they faced the latest threats from advancing armies. Instead, the king entered into military alliance against his enemies and that would spell the end of his reign and the collapse of his kingdom.

While Isaiah did not intend the sign for a people eight centuries into the future, nevertheless, Christians saw the fulfillment of the sign in Jesus. He is, as Matthew reminds us today, our sign that "God is with us." He is the reassurance in the flesh that God has not given up on us, but will remain with us. We, on our part, are invited to place our most fundamental trust in Christ. Through Christ, God is to be the center of our life and we are invited this Advent to once again have God and God's will as our primary source and guide.

Matthew's gospel begins and ends with a reminder that Jesus is "God-with-us." Thus, in today's reading, taken from the very beginning of the gospel, we are reminded that Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah's Emmanuel prophecy. The fourth Sunday in Advent shifts our attention to Mary's pregnancy "through the Holy Spirit." She was engaged to Joseph, and in those days that was as binding a commitment as a marriage license. It would have been very difficult to get out of the agreement, one would have to go through procedures similar to a divorce. While Mary is mentioned in the passage, the bulk of today's story focuses on Joseph. Almost nothing is said about him in the gospels, though Matthew does tell us his lineage. Today we hear the story of Jesus' conception from the point of view of Joseph. What we learn is that "God is with us," is no guarantee of easy sailing.

God's entrance into our human condition certainly made waves for both Mary and Joseph. They were betrothed, so they obviously had other plans than the ones the angel sprang on Mary and revealed to Joseph in his dream. It is not hard to imagine how difficult it was for Joseph, a "righteous" person who followed the law, not to do what the law required: condemn Mary for betrayal and subject her to punishment. He planned not to publicize what seemed like the wrong she committed and was ready to divorce her quietly.

The gospels help us see, in retrospect how Jesus fulfilled the Isaian prophecies. Joseph and Mary didn't have the advantage of our hindsight. They had to fulfill their roles in God's plans with many questions, perhaps only getting hints of understanding as events unfolded. "God is with us"—is no guarantee of easy sailing; no exemption from living with mystery and journeying with faith in darkness.

People have a lot of difficult journeys to make. Some raise handicapped or even emotionally disturbed children, taking care of them well beyond what most other parents normally have to do for their offspring. Some decide to live alternative life styles, putting aside career advancement in favor of a project to help others. Some choose to care for a spouse with Alzheimer's or another crippling disease. Some are widowed and may still have dependent children to raise. Some must hold down two low-paying jobs to pay for their children's education. Some decide to work for immigrants or people called "illegal" and must face the ire of some in the community. Some teach in elementary or high schools earning less than they could elsewhere. Some face old age with courage and, despite the limitations on their former life style, with humor.

These and so many others, have heard a call--- though not with angelic apparitions. The call invited them, in the midst of their lives and plans, to undertake a unique journey that would require courage, creativity, perseverance and sacrifice. They weren't guaranteed smooth sailing, just that somehow they would not be on their own—God would be with them. Like Joseph, who awoke from his dream and changed his plans, others have "awakened" after hearing their call and have set out in faith, with trust that God would sustain them. Emmanuel—"God is with us."

BABY SONG

From the private ease of Mother's womb
I fall into the lighted room.

Why don't they simply put me back
Where it is warm and wet and black?

But one thing follows on another.
Things were different inside Mother.

Padded and jolly I would ride
The perfect comfort of her inside.

They tuck me in a rustling bed
----I lie there, raging, small and red.

I may sleep soon, I may forget,
But I won't forget that I regret.

A rain of blood poured round her womb,
But all time roars outside this room.

—Thomas Gunn, "Collected Poems" (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994)

Medical science tells us that the most traumatic physical experience most human beings will endure is birth. The Word of God is flesh, Jesus entered and left the human realm through moments of extreme physical trauma, both involving pain, wailing, water and blood.

And so, from the drawing of his first breath, the birth of Jesus Christ is source and symbol of his passion. Moreover, it was an emblem of his very life and ministry, this leaving of the "private ease" of his eternal dwelling in glory with the Father. Even his falling forth into the room of a stable lit by angelic glory could not have compared to the warmth and security of dwelling in Mary's body.

But leave his "private ease" to enter into all of time he did. And so much we, too, leave our own places of private ease if we honestly claim to be font-born members of his Body.

----Alan Hommerding (Senior Editor, World Library Publications.)

The poem and Hommerding's reflection appear in "Preach," November/December, 2004, page 37.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

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POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

"Can you imagine what it's like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it's like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, 'I love you. I'll see you next week,' when you never know if they're going to call and say, 'He's up next—it's time for his execution.'"

----Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

Jamey Cheek #0538027 (On death row since 7/3/97)
Leroy Mann #0255136 (7/15/97)
Phillip Davis #0585797 (8/22/97)
----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: **“FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR A.”** The CD contains two reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. In addition, there are helpful essays for preaching during the liturgical seasons (Advent, Lent, the Triduum, etc.), ten book reviews and essays on various aspects of preaching. The files are in three formats (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect and Adobe Acrobat Reader) so you should have no trouble opening them on your computer. To purchase go to: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the “Year A–CD” button on the right and follow the instructions.
2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use “First Impressions” in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)
3. Our webpages: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> and <http://www.opsouth.org/> (Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes “First Impressions” and “Homilias Dominicales,” as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)
4. “Homilias Dominicales”-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like “First Impressions”, “Homilias Dominicales” are a preacher’s early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive “Homilias Dominicales” drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org
5. “First Impressions” is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like “First Impressions” sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>
Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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