

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 4<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY OF ADVENT (A)  
Isaiah 7: 10-14    Psalm 24    Romans 1: 1-7    Matthew 1: 18-24

Dear Preachers:

“This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about....” So begins today’s gospel passage. And if I were to complete the thought.... “the birth of Jesus Christ came about through a lot of messed up plans for some very good people!”

I realize I have focused almost exclusively on the gospel passages this Advent. In previous Advents I have preached from the first readings ----the prophets. Those readings from the Former Testament really reflect Advent realities of waiting, longing and the importance of making a more conscious response to God’s call. This Advent however, the gospels have seized my imagination, today’s in particular. I hear the mess that God’s entrance into our lives caused Mary and Joseph and I identify with the way my own seeming good plans have had to be dropped in the light of something else that God has had in mind. Shifts were necessary in my life, if I were reading God’s actions correctly, but that didn’t make them any less painful. I can identify with the betrothed couple who had good plans that were overridden by a God who had another thing in mind.

Mary appears in scripture passages throughout Jesus’ life and we do get opportunities to reflect on her faith and response to God. But Joseph is rarely mentioned and this is one story in which he plays a significant part. This good man was proceeding with his life in the most ordinary of ways—he was planning to marry the woman he loved. What could be more natural? More ordinary? More repeated in the history of our race? Two people and their families were planning a marriage. There were customs to be followed, but there was nothing out of the ordinary, as far as Joseph could perceive. But God was about to interrupt the good plans of good people for a far better one.

We are used to our notion of engagement and so we project that on the relationship between Mary and Joseph. But John Pilch (THE CULTURAL WORLD OF JESUS: SUNDAY BY SUNDAY, CYCLE A. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1995) reminds us that betrothal in the context of their Mediterranean culture was very different from our experience of engagements. Betrothal was far more serious and binding, it was the first stage of the marriage

process. The couple did not live together, but they were already set apart for each other. A divorce was required to break the betrothal and sexual relations with a betrothed woman was considered adultery. The marriage would be complete only after the negotiations between parents and family members were finalized and the groom took the bride into his home.

The reader is told that Mary is “with child through the Holy Spirit.” With Mary, we are let in on the true nature of this pregnancy. Mary knows how it came about. Joseph doesn’t. Had she tried to tell the man she loved about it? Is that how Joseph learned of it? Or had word of it gotten around the small village? Were people talking? Mary would not have been participating in the obligatory monthly ritual purifications with the other women. They would suspect something.

Joseph is described as a righteous man. As he perceived it, Mary’s child would belong to another and the cultural code would not allow him to take what did not belong to him—another man’s child. Rather than expose Mary to the punishment prescribed by Numbers 5: 11-31, he decides to step aside and not make a public scene. Perhaps he hoped that the true father would step forward. Well the true “father” does step forward, but what a surprise! God puts the record straight for Joseph in a dream. Not only are things not as disreputable as they seemed, but now honor will fall on Joseph for he is made part of God’s plan for us.

Matthew reminds us that these things happened to “fulfill” what the Lord said through the prophet—note our first reading from Isaiah. Ten times in Matthew we find similar references to “fulfillment”—the events of this gospel “fulfill” what the prophets had said. Jesus fulfills the longings of the people for an “Anointed One”, a messiah, as articulated by the prophets. All Israel’s hopes are coming to pass in this child soon to be born. Later, Jesus’ own message will be shown to fulfill what the prophets had promised. It is appropriate that today’s first reading comes from Isaiah, not only because of the allusion to the gospel, but because the work of Isaiah plays an important part in understanding Jesus’ ministry.

Joseph is first addressed as “Son of David” placing Jesus in the line of David. Then God takes a parent’s prerogative and chooses the name for this child—Jesus (Jeshua), meaning “salvation.” When Israel was taken into exile it was seen as a punishment for sin. God’s deliverance of Israel from slavery was thus interpreted as an act of salvation, freeing people from the consequence of their sin. Now,

through Jesus, God will again save the people from the slavery caused by their sin. Through Jesus, all people will be put in proper relationship with God. Forgiveness of sin is a key message in Matthew. So, if one looks closely at this passage early in Matthew's gospel, one can already detect the message of the Gospel unfolding: Jesus in Emmanuel, "God with us" who will bring us forgiveness and save us from our sin.

Human plans were overridden that God could do a very good thing for us. What upset the normal pattern for two people, set the pattern right for all of us. But Joseph did not know this at first and he must have felt supreme disappointment when he learned of Mary's pregnancy. His dream does clear things up for him. I wish all my doubts could be cleared up by such a divine intervention! "Don't worry Jude, I'll let you in on My plans." No such luck! I don't blame God for all the times my plans go awry. But I do get impatient waiting to see if God has anything at all to say to me in a confusing moment so as to take away at least some doubts and give me some clarity. Usually not! What I get is the strength and courage to muddle through. When I have my wits about me and some sense of focus or center, I pray and plod along one faith-step after another. When it comes to walking in darkness and trusting we are not alone. Advent is more of a year round season--- not just something we celebrate a month in December.

Joseph's is an encouraging story at such moments. It shows me how something good can come from what seems to me a complete mess. What I learn, even when I am the chief cause of the mess, is that God does not walk out of the process but stays engaged with me. I hope I am attentive at those moments to the Word of God that is trying to break through to speak to me, to the strength being offered and to the hope being reinforced.

Now there's an Advent prayer! Let's pray for hope to see us through the parts of our lives we find most confusing. Let's ask God for the courage to take still one more step into the darkness, trusting God will not walk out when we are in the blind spots of the journey. Let's pray that God's will is being done through us right now in all our endeavors—even though when we peer into the darkness all we can make out are shadows and confusion. Turns out, even though Joseph may have thought his world had turned upside down and he had reached a dead end, God was doing a very good thing for him and for us. Imagine that!

## Kwanzaa

Kwanzaa (Quansa) is a holiday celebrated by many African-Americans. It takes place right after Christmas (December 26<sup>th</sup>. - January 1<sup>st</sup>. ) and the two holidays share some similarities. Both involve loved ones, a feast, the exchange of presents, and both have themes of hope and peace.

It was started in 1966 by Doctor Maulana Karenga, Professor at the California State University, Long Beach, California. Dr. Karenga wanted Black Americans to have their own holiday so they could celebrate their own unique history.

The words of Kwanzaa come from **Swahili**. Swahili is special because no country can claim it as its own. Swahili is spoken by many different people all over Africa. Dr. Karenga chose it because it helps Black Americans remember that all of Africa is their ancestral land, not just one area or one country. The name "Kwanzaa" means "the first fruits of the harvest." **Kwanzaa** is mostly an American holiday, but it does show up in Canada and Europe.

The three colors of the flag of Kwanzaa are very symbolic and are used throughout the celebration.

**Red** represents the blood of the African people.

**Black** represents the face of the African people.

**Green** represents the fertile land and the hope of new life.

----notes from The Kwanzaa website.

### QUOTABLE:

Into this world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ has come uninvited. But because he cannot be at home in it, because he is out of place in it, his place is with those others for whom there is no room. His place is with those who do not belong, who are rejected by power because they are regarded as weak, those who are discredited, who are denied the status of person, who are tortured, bombed and exterminated. With those for whom there is not room, Christ is present in the world.”

—Thomas Merton

### 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](mailto:Jboll@opsouth.org) or [jboll@preacherexchange.org](mailto: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,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

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