

# FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel" (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took Mary as his wife.

(Mt 1:18-24)

Matthew takes pains to point out that “Emmanuel” means “God with us.” At the end of the Gospel, in the very last scene, Jesus will stand on the mountain in Galilee and say to the disciples, “I am with you always, till the end of time.” So the beginning and end of the Gospel according to Matthew is “God – in Jesus – is with us.” Sometimes people have wished he wasn’t!

Putting ourselves in St Joseph’s shoes, how must he have felt? Engaged to the best catch in the village, the ever gentle Mary, with a good job as a carpenter, his well-planned life enter the twilight zone between the believable and the unbelievable. Not enough that his beautiful bride-to-be has become pregnant, but when he sets the Plan B into motion he gets this dream that’s unlike any dream he’s had, a dream that, instead of being forgotten, changes his life. And Mary, although she’s unseen in this Gospel, cannot have being doing much better herself. What is often outstanding about the Gospel accounts is how human Joseph and Mary are: Joseph here coping as best he can with the strangest situation, his life derailed by God and by a dream. In St Luke’s Gospel, too, the amazement of the young couple at all that is said about their child is very touching: no more than anyone else, they haven’t got it all figured out. Christianity is not so much about our search for God, but God’s search for us, and when he comes he can upset even the best of human plans, because he’s got something better himself. The Catechism speaks of God’s ‘thirst for us.’ During his first homily as pope, Benedict XVI spoke for all Catholics when he said, ‘There is nothing more beautiful than to be surprised by the Gospel, by the encounter with Christ.’ Elsewhere he once said, ‘What do we mean when we say that God is the “living God”? It means that he can surprise us.’

Advent and Christmas catch a child’s imagination as everything promises to be new. Like a child on Christmas night, we can have an expectation that God is going to do something surprising. Let’s wake up on Christmas morning with an unbelievable thought: God is going to surprise me. After all, he’s already done it that first Christmas.

## QUESTIONS

1. He is called Jesus because “he will save his people from their sins.” Is it important to you personally if Jesus would “save you from your sins”? If so, why? And if not, why does the angel give him this name?
2. See the quotation above from Pope Benedict XVI at his opening Mass of his pontificate in 2005. Do you agree with what he says here?
3. Do you have any idea of a surprise that you would like God to give you on Christmas Day?

## PROJECT

Remember the best (welcome!) surprise you ever got on a Christmas morning and pray to God for a similar surprise this Christmas.

