

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Thanks for Lasting Joy

Lord, our God,
who pours out every blessing,
as we prepare to remember
the coming of your Son,
help us to see the difference
between what we think we need
and what we do need.
Give us insight to recognize your gift
in the people around us,
the places where you've put us,
the tasks that we must do.
Lead us to seek you,
not the perfect present,
the spotless house, or
the amazing meal.
Be, then, our
lasting joy.
We ask this through
Christ our Lord.
Amen.



Sunday, December 19, 2010 Tension or Joy?

Today's Readings: Isaiah 7:10–14; Romans 1:1–7; Matthew 1:18–24. Light. Peace. Patience. Now joy. It may sound odd in a week overflowing with preparation: shopping, cooking, decorating, running errands. Words like *stress* or *fatigue* spring more easily to mind. But hidden in the readings, like surprises beneath the tree, are causes for celebration.

God truly understands human beings when, in the First Reading, he tells Ahaz to ask for a sign. Some of us occasionally think in terms of magic: If the phone rings right now, I'll know I should take the job. If the car breaks down here, I shouldn't attend the meeting. If the gift is precisely the right color, I should buy it. God, who made our human minds, knows that propensity.

Furthermore, God is prepared to send a staggering sign, far more than Ahaz ever dreamed. As scripture commentators

have pointed out, what Ahaz really needed, with his kingdom being invaded, was an army. Instead, he got the promise of a baby. A baby must have also seemed unhelpful to Joseph. Unmarried, torn between compassion and rigid codes of honor, he creates a compromise, a quiet divorce. Then God's direct intervention shows him a better way.

We, too, think we know what things we need—most likely, things we can't afford. A baby coming into our lives can seem like an overwhelming burden, a responsibility we can't handle. Yet this child will save us all. God must chuckle as he surprises us with something, someone, infinitely better than what we envision. If God is with us, indeed, taking on human flesh, the joy outshines anything else we could possibly want for Christmas.

This Week at Home



Monday, December 20

God's Surprises

Today's Gospel sets the tone for the rest of the week. As we prepare to commemorate Christ's birth, we hear the words of the angel, announcing that Mary will be the mother of "the Son of the Most High" and that Elizabeth, Mary's barren, elderly cousin, is also pregnant. To be a barren woman was a dire fate at this time. Yet God turns Elizabeth's tragedy to treasure, promising her a son, even in her old age. Remember a disappointment you have experienced. How did the passage of time or God's grace change it? Then imagine yourself praising God, as Elizabeth does in Luke 1:25. Today's Readings: Isaiah 7:10-14; Luke 1:26-38.

Tuesday, December 21

Saint Peter Canisius

One of the first Jesuits, Peter Canisius (1521-1597), was a great teacher, preacher, and diplomat, working mainly in Germany to defend and teach the Catholic faith during the Protestant Reformation. He founded numerous colleges and universities. In the midst of violent controversy, he remained positive and generous toward opponents. Peter recognized the power of printed media and encouraged book publication, still a new technology. To honor him, read an article in a Catholic magazine or a book about our faith this month. Today's Readings: Song of Songs 2:8-14; Luke 1:39-45.

Wednesday, December 22

Jesse Tree

As Christmas approaches, create a Jesse tree from a bare tree branch, a custom named for King David's father, Jesse. Read Isaiah 11:1: a shoot will sprout from Jesse and form a tall tree of ancestors that ends with Jesus. Making this tree will help you learn about important Old Testament figures.

Anchor the branch in rocks in a large tin can. Then cut out felt or paper symbols representing the ancestors, and hang them on the branch with yarn or string, reading the

corresponding scripture passage. Try some of the possibilities listed today and tomorrow: a rainbow for Noah (Genesis 9:11-17), a tree for Abraham (Genesis 18:1), a tent for Sarah (Genesis 18:9-14), a ladder for Jacob (Genesis 28:10-17). Today's Readings: 1 Samuel 1:24-28; Luke 1:46-56.

Thursday, December 23

More Jesse Tree Symbols

Continue to add these symbols to your Jesse tree: a shepherd's crook for Rachel (Genesis 29:9-12), a colorful coat for Joseph (Genesis 37:3), a tambourine for Miriam (Exodus 15:20-21), a lamp for Samuel (1 Samuel 3:1-3), a sheaf of wheat for Ruth (Ruth 2:1-9), a harp for David (1 Samuel 16:17-18), a dove for Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-45), an angel for Mary (Luke 1:26-35), a manger for Jesus (Luke 2:1-7). Today's Readings: Malachi 3:1-4, 23-24; Luke 1:57-66.

Friday, December 24

Pause to Reflect

It's tempting to rush through chores today, doing final shopping, decorating, and cooking. Those activities may naturally consume most of the day. But build in reflection time too. Sit in silence by the Christmas tree, Advent wreath, or a window. Think what Jesus' Incarnation as a human being means to you. How is your life different because he was born? What would you like to say to Jesus or Mary? Today's Readings: (Morning) 2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16; Luke 1:67-69.

Saturday, December 25

Christmas Day

Now, at last, the preparations are either completed or abandoned, and we can rest in the happiness of this day. Be attuned to all the ways Christ continues to be born in our midst. Perhaps it's through a child's energy, a friend's gift, the beauty of snowy evergreens, or our own joy. Phone someone who may be ill, lonely, or grieving today to share the peace of Christ's coming. Today's Readings: (Day) Isaiah 52:7-10; Hebrews 1:1-6; John 1: 1-18.



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Keeping the Seasons
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