

# Advent 4

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December 23, 2001

## Prayer of the Day

Stir up your power, O Lord, and come. Take away the hindrance of our sins and make us ready for the celebration of your birth, that we may receive you in joy and serve you always; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen

## Isaiah 7:10-16

{10} Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, *11* Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. *12* But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. *13* Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? *14* Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. *15* He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. *16* For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

[1-9: In 734 b.c. Israel and Syrian (Aram) have a coalition to invade Judah and attack Jerusalem. Yahweh promised that they would fail, and be destroyed (the date alluded to in verse 8 would be 669 b.c., long after the destruction of Israel in 722 b.c.) Ahaz has sought help from Assyria (1 Kings 16:5-9); Yahweh urges him not to be afraid of them, but to "stand firm in faith."]

*10. Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the Lord your God:* Yahweh invites Ahaz to ask for a sign to reassure himself that Yahweh will protect Judah against her enemies. "Ahaz's refusal to trust shattered the solidarity between the house of David and the people of God (v. 17)." [1] It should be remembered that Ahaz was in his early twenties at this time (2 Kings 16:2).

*12. Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test:* An allusion to Deuteronomy 6:16. In a way Yahweh is putting Ahaz to the test because to put his trust in Yahweh he must forego an alliance with Assyria (2 Kings 16:7 ff.). Ahaz cloaks his refusal to do that under the guise of not putting Yahweh to the test.

*13. Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also?:* Isaiah dismisses Ahaz' response as a wearisome pretense that disguises only a rejection of Yahweh (see 2 Kings 16:1-4).

*14. the Lord himself will give you a sign:* Note that this Lord is not the name Yahweh, but *Adonai*, a title of respect. Yahweh will give a sign anyway, "a special event, wither ordinary or miraculous, that serves as a pledge by which to confirm the prophetic word. The sign precedes in the impending threat or promise, and prefigures the fulfillment by the affinity in content between the sign and its execution." [2]

*a young woman:* Hebrew *'almah*, not *bethula* the specific word for a virgin. However, Brevard Childs points out that with the exception of one, all the women the word is applied to actually appear to be virgins (Genesis 24:43; Exodus 2:8; Psalm 68:26), and that "It is highly unlikely that a married woman would still be referred to as an *'almah*. The LXX translates *'almah* as *parthenos* which does mean virgin. Still, the emphasis is not on the virginity of the mother, but the birth of a child, who will bear the sign-name,

Immanuel, God-with-us, and who will be only a few years old when the coalition states are destroyed. Though it cannot be demonstrated definitively many commentators believe that the child was Hezekiah, Ahaz' successor. I Kings 18:5 ff. says, "He trusted in the LORD the God of Israel; so that there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah after him, or among those who were before him. For he held fast to the LORD; he did not depart from following him but kept the commandments that the LORD commanded Moses. The LORD was with him; wherever he went, he prospered." However, Hezekiah was born in 740 b.c. which would place his birth before Ahaz' co-regency, seven years or so before the events in the text. The other popular identification is that the young woman was Isaiah's wife, the prophetess, and the child, Immanuel, was his third son.

*15. he shall eat curds and honey:* A reference to the "land flowing with milk and honey," the land of Israel. (Exodus 3:8, etc.).

*by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good:* "It is conventionally reckoned that a child knows the difference between 'good and evil,' right and wrong, by two years of age." [3]

*16. the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted:* The coalition was destroyed by Assyria in 734-732 by Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria, within the two years specified.

[17: This verse warns Ahaz of consequences of his lack of faith in Yahweh. After the Assyrian king has finished with Pekah and Rezin he will invade Judah.]

### **Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19**

{1} Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth 2 before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us! 3 Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved. 4 O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers? 5 You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure. 6 You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves. 7 Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved....17 But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself. 18 Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name. 19 Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

*1. Shepherd of Israel:* A reference to the image of Yahweh as a shepherd (Isaiah 40:11; Jeremiah 31:10). The image comes to its fullness in the Good Shepherd.

*enthroned on the cherubim.* The Ark of the Covenant was viewed as Yahweh's throne on earth. There he was enthroned between the cherubim, the winged lions that were mounted on it lid.

*2. Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh:* Tribes of the Northern Kingdom. The Psalm is a prayer for the deliverance and restoration of Israel, in the period shortly before her end in 722 b.c. The LXX translation of the Psalm has a note "concerning the Assyrian," a reference to the Assyrian threat at the end of the eighth century bc.

*3, 7, 19:* A refrain. Possibly also in verse 14, which is now corrupt.

*Lord, God of Hosts:* Yahweh Sebaoth; cf. 1 Samuel 4:4.

*5-6:* The troubles of the present (verses 5-6) are contrasted with the Exodus and conquest (in the omitted verses 8-11).

*bread of tears.* God has also given us other bread to eat, not because of our deserving, but because of his goodness.

*17. the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself:* In the Hebrew the second "the one..." is literally *the Son of Man*. This may be a reference to the King of Israel who is at the right hand of the Lord, or a special intercession for

Benjamin, the "son of the right hand."

## **Romans 1:1-7**

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, 2 which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, 3 the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh 4 and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, 5 through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, 6 including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, 7 To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

*1. Paul...servant...apostle:* Paul introduces himself to the Christians in Rome as a servant (slave) and an apostle. The two are not mutually exclusive; a slave could be sent with a commission and a message by his master.

*3. the gospel:* Christianity had reached Rome by the fourth decade of the first century.

*5: to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles.* In Galatians Paul bases his mission to the Gentiles on the recognition of the Jerusalem leaders (Galatians 1:7-8). *including yourselves.* Claudius expelled the Jews, including Christian Jews, from Rome in 49 a.d. because of disputes over "Chrestus" (see Acts 18:2). The edict was lifted by Nero in 54. If Paul's letter was written in 58 Christian Jews had been allowed to return to Rome four years earlier. The Christian community in Rome, then was probably a mixed Jewish-Gentile community, made up of several ethnically unmixed house churches. In his letter Paul encourages respect and harmony between the two groups.

*7. called to be saints:* Those called into a special relationship by God. All Christians in Rome, both Jew and Gentile.

## **Matthew 1:18-25**

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." 24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

*1-17:* Matthew describes Jesus' ancestry by means of a genealogy which begins with Abraham: fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen, from David to the exile, and fourteen from Jeconiah to Jesus. This provides us with the physical descent of Jesus. Verses 18ff provide the legal descent.

*18. engaged:* "...to suggest that the ancient practice of 'betrothal' is akin to our notion of 'engagement' before marriage is a cultural anachronism. Marriages in antiquity were made between extended families, not individuals, and were parentally arranged; they were not agreements between a man and woman who have been romantically involved....such contracts are negotiated by the mothers of the two families involved and are then ratified by each family patriarch....As a process, marriage is the disembedding of the prospective wife from her birth family and her embedding in the honor of her new husband....A wife remained for the most part on the periphery of her new husband's family. She would be perceived as a 'stranger,' an outsider, by everyone in the family, and that changed in some measure only when she became the mother of a

son. Moreover, a son would grow up to be his mother's ally and an advocate of her interests within the family, not only against his father but against his own wife....Thus the wife's most important relationship in the family is that to her son." [4]

19. *Joseph, being a righteous man*: "Since the child Mary was carrying was not his, he would not usurp the right of another by taking it. By divorcing Mary, Joseph offered the real father of Jesus the opportunity of retrieving his child by marrying the mother. Moreover, he would carry out this divorce 'quietly' because he was not willing to shame Mary. Clearly such a motive indicates a decent and honorable person." [5]

20. *appeared to him in a dream*: Joel 2:28, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions (cf. Acts 2:17).

*Joseph, son of David*: The angel establishes Joseph's Davidic descent.

*the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit*: This is the true genealogy of Jesus, from the Holy Spirit. His human, physical genealogy is an honorable one, his putative legal father is a righteous man, but he is the Son of God, which is even more honorable. Paul describes Jesus Christ, in the same terms: "descended from David according to the flesh and...declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:3-4).

21. *you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins*: The name Jesus (Joshua in Hebrew) is translated, "Yahweh is help." [6] "By naming the child, Joseph exercises his right as a father and thereby acknowledges Jesus as his legal son."

[7]

23. *the prophet*: The quotation is from Isaiah 7:14 (Septuagint). "The inclusion of the Old Testament citation (v. 23) has the effect of connecting Jesus with the fulfillment of a promise to David's house....It thereby underlines the legitimacy of the claim that Jesus is the Son of David." [8] The Hebrew "maiden" becomes "virgin" in the Septuagint, which provides the opportunity to base the Virgin Birth in prophecy.

*Emmanuel*: "Matthew has added a new element to the traditional narrative of the naming of Jesus. It is most important for him that Jesus is Immanuel. With that he points from the beginning to the living reality of the community, 'with' which Jesus will be always, to the close of the age (28.20). With this, a purely historical dimension of his story of Jesus is fractured from the beginning. Jesus is not a figure of the past, but the one who accompanies and bears his community....1:18-25 make clear that the earthly one is no other than the exalted one who is 'with' his community. At the same time, the Gospel of Matthew—and that is important in this Gospel of the law and the commandments—contains at the beginning a clear indication of the grace which occurs through Jesus Christ." [9]

## Reflection

The first lesson speaks of a sign given to Ahaz to prove that Yahweh was in control of the situation as Judah faced the coalition of Israel and Syria who sought to destroy her. Within two years the coalition had been destroyed. The promised son would be faithful to Yahweh and institute a series of religious reforms that would undo many of Ahaz' accommodations to Assyrian religious practices.

The Psalm pleads for Yahweh's intervention in the destruction of the northern kingdom following the conquest by the Assyrians. Though they used the right words their hearts were not right with God, and the kingdom came to an end with the exile of the people to Assyria and their replacement by people from other places (2 Kings 17:1-24).

Paul describes his function as a slave and apostle to bring about the obedience of faith among the Gentiles. They, too, will be called "saints." God's work is carried out against the judgment of Joseph.

God's purposes will be accomplished, with or without our comprehension, without reference to our cooperation, to our blessing or adversity. That is a highly desirable certainty. But it is also a demanding one. Our role is not to contribute to the accomplishment of God's will, but to place our trust and confidence in that certainty in spite of all the indications and all our fears to the contrary. If we fail, if we cannot believe, God will save us from our sins, he will restore us, his face will shine and he will be with us always, to the close of the age.

### **Hymns** [\[10\]](#)

With One Voice (e.g. 762v), Hymnal Supplement 1991 (e.g. 725s) and LBW (e.g. 32).  
E=Entrance; D=Hymn of the Day; I=First Lesson, P=Psalm; II=Second Lesson;  
G=Gospel

30 --E--Come, Thou Long  
180 --D--My Soul Now  
28 --D--Saviour of the  
61 --I--The Hills Are  
58 --I--Lo, How a Rose

730v --P--My Soul Proclaims  
634v --P--Sing of Mary (756s)  
692v --G--For All the Faithful  
632v --G--The Angel Gabriel  
6, 818s, 170 (st. 2), 41, 198

### **Prayers of the People** [\[11\]](#)

P or A: Our God is almighty and all powerful, yet, in compassion, enters our fallen world to bring salvation and everlasting life. For God's grace, we express our wonder and praise in the words of Mary, praying, "You have done great things, O God." and responding, "Holy is your name."

A: For the whole church, that it may ever appreciate your creation of a holy people through the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ. You have done great things, O God. Holy...

A: For all men and women who serve our federal and provincial governments, that they may lead with fairness and integrity, and be moved to address problems of poverty, inequality, and environmental destruction. You have done great things, O God. Holy...

A: For all who are stressed and anxious in a rushed and frantic season, that they may hear your promise of peace and salvation through all distractions. You have done great things, O God. Holy...

A: For this congregation, that we might trust in the coming reign of Christ, though we have not yet witnessed it with our eyes. As your servant Mary trusted the angel's message of her unseen child, grant us faith to live holy lives of service until the day of your promised coming. You have done great things, O God. Holy...

A: For families, that physical and emotional distances be bridged, and that we reflect your ever-present love and willingness to forgive in all our relationships. You have done great things, O God. Holy...

P: You are indeed holy, O Lord. We praise you for the great things you have done and for your continued inspiration in our daily lives. We commend all our prayers to you through Jesus' name. Amen.

### **Or** [\[12\]](#)

*Presider or deacon*

As we wait with pregnant expectation for the coming of Jesus, let us offer prayers to God

who sends his Son in the womb of a virgin.

*Deacon or other leader*



For the coming of Jesus Christ in power and glory.  
For the coming of Wisdom to teach and guide us.  
For the coming of Emmanuel, the hope of all the peoples.  
For the peace of the world, and for our unity in Christ.  
For N our bishop and all bishops, for the presbyters, for the deacons and all who minister in Christ, and for all the holy people of God.  
For the church throughout the world and the faithful in every place.  
For the leaders of the nations and all in authority.  
For justice, peace, and freedom among peoples of the earth.  
For travelers, for the sick and the suffering, for the hungry and the oppressed, and for those in prison.  
For the dying and the dead.  
For our deliverance from all affliction, strife, and need.  
Joining our voices with the blessed Virgin Mary and with all the saints and angels of God, let us offer ourselves and one another to the living God through Christ. **To you, O Lord.**

*Presider*

O Emmanuel, our king and lawgiver, desire of all nations and savior of all peoples, come and save us, O Lord our God. Glory to you for ever.

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## Notes

[1] Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, p. 67.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 65.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 71.

[4] Bruce Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, pp. 28-30.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 26.

[6] Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary*, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989, p.117.

[7] Sheila Klassen-Wiebe, "Matthew 1:18-25," *Interpretation*, 46(1992)392.

[8] *Loc. Cit.*

[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 122f.

[10] <http://www.worship.on.ca/text/rc1c0001.txt>

[11] [http://www.worship.on.ca/text/inter\\_c.txt](http://www.worship.on.ca/text/inter_c.txt)

[12] <http://members.cox.net/oplater/prayer.htm>