



FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

CYCLE A

Isaiah 7:10-14
Romans 1:1-7
Matthew 1:18-24

GATHERING

(Four unlit candles surrounded by seasonal greens are arranged on a table in the gathering place.)

This week's liturgy holds up for us the one sign necessary for direction in our lives, the sign of the son born of a virgin. *(As the session begins, members share with one another how their preparation for this year's celebration of Christmas is going.)*

OPENING PRAYER

(The facilitator for this session invites the community to some moments of quiet. The four candles are lit and some instrumental music plays quietly.)

Leader: Let the Glorious Sovereign enter; this splendid ruler is God.

All: God owns this planet
and all its riches.
The earth and every creature belong to God.
God set the land on top of the seas
and anchored it in the deep.

Leader: Let the Glorious Sovereign enter; this splendid ruler is God.

All: Who is fit to climb God's mountain
and stand in his holy place?
Whoever has integrity:
not chasing shadows,
not living lies.

Leader: Let the Glorious Sovereign enter; this splendid ruler is God.

All: God will bless them,
their savior will bring justice.
These people long to see the Lord,
they seek the face of Jacob's God.

Leader: Let the Glorious Sovereign enter; this splendid ruler is God.

An adaptation of Psalm 24 from the **Liturgical Psalter**, Copyright © 1994, ICEL. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

Focus Question

Lost on the road, what do you do? Stop and ask for directions? Hang in there and find your way alone?

SCRIPTURE SHARING AND REFLECTION

(The scriptures are proclaimed aloud with a pause between readings.)

Commentary

You're on the road, heading to someplace you haven't been before. The directions are not clear. What to do? Turn here; turn there? Keep going straight ahead? You look for signs. A life decision lies before you. The options are several. Each has pluses and minuses. What to do? You look for signs. Caught in a difficult personal relationship, you feel hurt and doubt. You need affirmation and support. You look for signs. Life is a great mystery. We struggle to fathom it all. We search for meaning. We yearn for a sense of God's presence. We look for signs.

If we yearn for signs, we also resist them. Ahaz, king of Judah, is caught in a time of trial. On God's behalf, the prophet invites the king to ask for a sign of hope, a sign of the Lord's care. But Ahaz wants to do what he wants to do. He resists the offer of a sign of God's help. The Lord offers a sign regardless, the sign of the son born of a virgin, a son to be named, Emmanuel, "God with us." Christians have come to recognize that this sign promised to Ahaz is only fully realized in the son of the virgin named, Jesus, "Yaweh saves". Emmanuel/Jesus: taken together the names tell us that God saves us not by acting remotely from above, but by being intimately related to us in Jesus of Nazareth.

This week's readings root Jesus, son of David, in the history of his people, in the ages-long story of God acting for his people. God knows we need signs. He offers them all the time. Like Joseph we need to have eyes that see, ears that hear. Joseph was acting from what Paul would call an "obedient faith" when he decided to divorce Mary. But he reversed himself with an even more "obedient faith" in response to the inspiration of the angel. Joseph's experience alerts us to the fact that what seems like a faithful response in one instance can very quickly be revealed to be unfaithful.

We are not alone on the road. The sign of the virgin-born son, Jesus, Emmanuel remains. His Spirit speaks always and everywhere to those who have ears to hear. Signs abound!

FAITH SHARING AND INTEGRATION

1. How long does it take for you to look for help when you are *banging your head against a brick wall*?
2. Where have you found unexpected signs of God bringing help into your life?
3. When has fidelity to God called you to turn away sharply from something which at first seemed to be the right thing to do?
4. What signs do you see of God's acting on our behalf in the world today?

RESPONSE IN ACTION

1. Support the efforts of Birthright to reach out to young people dealing with an unplanned pregnancy. Contact www.birthright.org for information and a local organization in your area.
2. Set aside fifteen minutes of quiet time this week to notice the signs of God's presence in your life that you may have been overlooking.
3. Be impatient for God's reign. Be on the watch at holiday gatherings for conversations that condemn or judge others. Sensitively encourage others to speak with compassion.

SENDING FORTH AND CLOSING PRAYER

(Members join in singing, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." The song may be found on the Internet.)

*(As members offer prayers of praise, thanksgiving or petition, the community responds: **Come, Lord Jesus, come!**)*

*(The session concludes with the praying of the **Lord's Prayer.**)*

Special Note: *Before this session ends, members consider planning the next session to include a festive Christmas pot-luck supper. If the group decides to do so, a few minutes are taken to make the appropriate arrangements. One suggestion to consider is the idea that members bring foods that reflect their ethnic heritage. .*