

Fourth Sunday of Advent
Cycle A RCL
Revised

Isaiah 7:10–17

On assuming power in 735 BCE, young King Ahaz faced an invasion from Israel and Syria designed to force him into rebellion against Assyria. Instead of joining the rebellion, however, Ahaz, against Isaiah's advice, decided to appeal to Assyria for help against the coalition. In his exasperation, the prophet invited the king to ask for a sign from God to prove the truth of the prophet's advice; but the king piously refused, and the sign of *Immanu-el* ("With-us God") was Isaiah's frustrated answer. "Young woman" in 7:14 (*'almah*) is a reference to a woman of marriageable age. The Greek translation of the Hebrew text (the Septuagint) translated *'almah* into Greek as *parthenos*, "virgin."

Psalms 80:1-7, 16-18

In Babylon, Jews had no temple where they might pour out their lamentations to the Lord. Nevertheless, Jewish writers, probably priests, imitated the style of the Temple's old *community laments* to decry their Exile and to attempt to rouse the God, who once ruled in Zion, to come to their aid again. Verses 1-3 (Hebrew 2-4) use the names of northern tribes: Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin. This has suggested to some that the lament originated in ancient Israel, the Hebrew nation that fell to Sargon II in 721 BCE, long before Judah's exile. The omission of verses 8-17 (Hebrew 9-18) in the lectionary deprives us of the various rationales the writer uses to convince God to intervene.

Romans 1:1–7

Paul wrote this letter to the church in Rome from his lodgings in Corinth prior to his departure for Jerusalem. In it he attempted to defend himself against charges that he despised Jewish Law and had no right to the Roman church's support in his anticipated mission to Spain. Paul had to answer this charge convincingly because Rome possessed an unusually large Jewish population, and the Roman church almost certainly did too. Consequently, Paul begins his letter by placing his message about Jesus squarely within the context of Jewish scripture and tradition.

Matthew 1:18–25

In first-century Judaism, the fathers of young women often betrothed their daughters to their future husbands by the age of six months. Betrothal, not marriage, constituted the legal bond between husband and wife; so when Joseph learned of Mary's pregnancy, he resolved to break that bond with a *get* or document of divorce. This document would entitle Mary's father to the divorce payment stipulated in the bill of betrothal, and he would then try to find her another husband. Since the author of Matthew believes the events in the life of Jesus specifically fulfilled the sacred scriptures, the author has the birth of Jesus fulfill the scripture from Isaiah we read for the first lesson. The prophecy of birth by a virgin predicts birth from a virgin only in the Greek Bible, the Septuagint. (See above on Isaiah 7:10–17.)