

**Opening Prayer**

**Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.**

**Isaiah 7:10-16**

<sup>7:10</sup> Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, <sup>11</sup> Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. <sup>12</sup> But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. <sup>13</sup> Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. <sup>16</sup> 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.

**Commentary**

**Background:** *This book can be divided into two (and possibly three) parts. Chapters 1 to 39 were written before the exile, from about 740 BC to about 700 BC. These were difficult times for the southern kingdom, Judah: a disastrous war was fought with Syria; the Assyrians conquered Israel, the northern kingdom, in 723 BC, and threatened Judah. Isaiah saw the cause of these events as social injustice, which he condemned, and against which he fought valiantly.*

**Assyria**, an ancient empire whose capital was Nineveh (current location = Iraq), was intent on expanding westwards, towards Israel and Judah, in or about 730-720 BC. The kings of Israel formed a coalition with the rulers of **Syria** (**Syria** was kingdom located at the northeast corner of Israel, lying between Israel and the Euphrates river. Its capital was Damascus.) They tried to convince Ahaz, king of Judah and of the "house of David" to join the alliance; he has refused. Isaiah counsels with Ahaz, telling him that "take heed ... do not fear ... these two smoldering stumps of firebrands" (that is, Israel and Syria) who have "plotted evil against you" (v. 5). Isaiah tells Ahaz that he needs to stand firm in faith in God – otherwise, he and Judah will be defeated.

God now speaks again to Ahaz: ask any "sign" (v. 11), any confirmation of my promise delivered by Isaiah – any at all in all creation. ("Sheol" was the subterranean abode of the dead.). But it seems that Ahaz has already made up his mind (v. 12) so, through Isaiah, God gives to the "house of David" (v. 13) not a "sign" (v. 11) to convince Ahaz, but one which speaks to future generations. God will keep the promise he made to King David (through the prophet Nathan): "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me" (2 Samuel 7:16). "The young woman" (v. 14, possibly Ahaz's wife) is pregnant; David's line will continue; she will name her son "Immanuel" (meaning *God with us*). In a devastated land (paying heavy tribute to

Assyria), where only basic food is available (“curds and honey”, v. 15), he will develop moral discrimination – unlike recent kings, who were deemed wicked, ungodly people. By this time, Assyria will have conquered both Syria and Israel (v. 16).

### Reflection

For Christians, the child who is born to the “young woman,” and who is given the name Immanuel – “God with us” – speaks to us very deeply of Jesus the Christ. What words “light up” for you in this rather difficult passage – God speaking to a representative of the House of David? God giving a “sign” even when one is not asked for? God setting a little child as the marker of the continuation of David’s line? Through all of these actions, it is clear that God cares about his people – today as yesterday. What gives you hope, this Christmas, that God loves this world?

### Romans 1:1-7

<sup>1:1</sup> Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, <sup>2</sup> which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, <sup>3</sup> the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh <sup>4</sup> 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, <sup>5</sup> 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, <sup>6</sup> including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, <sup>7</sup> 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.

### Commentary

**Background:** *Romans is the first epistle in the New Testament, although not the first to be written. Paul wrote it to the church at Rome, which included both Jews and Gentiles. His primary theme is the basics of the good news of Christ, salvation for all people. The book was probably written in 57 AD, when Paul was near the end of his third missionary journey around the Eastern Mediterranean. It is unusual in that it was written to a church that Paul had not visited.*

Paul introduces himself to his readers:

- as “servant” (literally *slave*) of Christ, one under more than the usual obligation Christians have to Jesus;
- as an “apostle”, one sent with a special mission of divine origin; and
- as “set apart” to spread God’s good news.

This news of eternal life with God was “promised beforehand” (v. 2): it has been part of God’s plan since before creation. God made known his promise “through his prophets” (principally Isaiah and Jeremiah) in books held to have authority. (When Paul wrote, both Testaments were yet to be defined.) The “gospel” (“good news”) is about one very close to God, “his Son”, here identified in two ways:

- physically (“flesh”): of David’s line, so meeting the Old Testament prerequisites for messiahship; and
- spiritually (“spirit ...”, v. 4): definitively stated by God to be the “Christ” (Messiah) in resurrecting him.

It is through Christ that Paul has received “grace” (God’s freely given gift of love) and “apostleship” (authority to teach and proclaim the good news) – with the objective of bringing people (especially non-Jews) to faith in God and thus making it possible for them to place themselves under God’s authority (“obedience of faith”). Paul sees the Christians at “Rome” (v. 7) as “called to be saints”: literally *called holy ones*, belonging to God and consecrated to his service. (The same Greek words are found in the Septuagint, the Greek translation Paul would have used, to describe the Israelite community. We, he suggests, are in continuity with them. In v. 1, he sees himself as in being in continuity with Moses, Joshua and Abraham - all called *servants of God* in the Old Testament.) Finally, he wishes the Roman community both God’s “grace” (v. 7) and his “peace”, the Jewish notion of a right relationship with God - partnership in reconciliation of all to him, eternal well-being, and wholeness of life.

### Reflection

It’s striking that Paul uses the phrase, “called to be” three times in this reading: he says he is “called to be an apostle”: the church at Rome is “called to belong to Jesus Christ,” and the Romans are “called to be saints.” To what is called calling YOU in this last week before Christ’s birth?

### Matthew 1:18-25

<sup>1:18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." <sup>24</sup> When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup> but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

### Commentary

**Background:** *This gospel is the first in the New Testament, but it was probably the second to be written. Scholars recognize that it borrows material from Mark, and from a sayings source containing sayings of Jesus and known as Q (for Quelle, German for source). The author shows an understanding of Jewish culture and religion not found in the other gospels. It was probably written about 60 to 70 AD, possibly for a largely Jewish audience.*

Matthew has told us of Jesus’ descent from David. He is the anointed (“Messiah”) king God has promised. Joseph’s and Mary’s families have signed a marriage contract but Joseph has not yet *taken her* (v. 20) into his house. If Mosaic law on sexual relations was fully observed then, Joseph could have brought charges against her, and she could have been stoned to death (“public disgrace”, v. 19) for *adultery* (then including pre-marital sex). Joseph, while observant

of the Law (“righteous”), is compassionate: he “planned to dismiss [divorce] her quietly”. God had intervened in the birth of some he has chosen - Isaac, Jacob and Samuel – but never before has he replaced the whole male role. Even so, the messenger from God points out Joseph’s role: Jesus is legally descended from David through him. In Aramaic and Hebrew, “Jesus” (v. 21) and “he will save” sound similar. Matthew is keen to show that Jesus fulfills God’s promise made through Isaiah (v. 22).

## Reflection

Does it ever seem to you that Joseph plays a supporting role in the story of Jesus’ birth, but in fact, things would not have unfolded as they did had Joseph not heeded the angel’s command, and had gone ahead to “put (Mary) away quietly”? He made his decision to support Mary at some risk to himself, and certainly filled with perplexity at this circumstance. But Joseph was faithful to Mary, and faithful to God’s purposes. Are you content to be a supporting player in the holy drama that is God’s plan of salvation for this world?

## Responsive Psalter

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

<sup>80:1</sup> Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth

<sup>2</sup> **before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us!**

<sup>3</sup> Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

<sup>4</sup> **O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?**

<sup>5</sup> You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure.

<sup>6</sup> **You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves.**

<sup>7</sup> Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

<sup>80:17</sup> **But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself.**

<sup>18</sup> Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name.

<sup>19</sup> **Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.**

## Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.