

## 4<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY of ADVENT – Year A

This Sunday's Readings talk about Jesus as the Immanuel, meaning, "God is with us" to give us reassurance amidst of our daily challenges. As I reflect on that message, I'm reminded of this cute story that I'd like to share with you.

One of Tommy's favorite games was to ride his mother's broom around the yard like a horse. When it started to get dark, Tommy went into the house, leaving the broom in the yard. In cleaning up after dinner, Tommy's mother asked the boy to bring in her broom.

"But, I'm scared to go out in the dark, Mama," said the boy.

Mother answered, "The Lord is out there, honey. Don't be afraid."

So Tommy opened the back door a crack & called out, "Lord, if you're out there, hand me the broom!"

I'm sure many of us feel scared & lost in this world like Tommy due to our life challenges. We need the Immanuel to give us confidence & reassurance in our daily life. Anyway, the context of this Sunday's First Reading refers to the campaign of Syria & northern Israel against southern Judah in the reign of King Ahaz. Syria & Israel decided to revolt by withholding payment to the Empire Assyria while Judah & King Ahaz had refused to join the alliance. Syria & Israel attempted to overthrow King Ahaz & replace him with a king more amenable with their wishes. Faced with an actual invasion, however, "the heart of the king & the heart of the people trembled, as the trees of the forest tremble in the wind" (Isaiah 7:2). At this moment, prophet Isaiah goes to meet King Ahaz, who is apparently checking his water supply in anticipation of a siege by Syria & Israel. His advice to the king is startling. He does not suggest the course that King Ahaz would eventually take, to appeal to the Empire Assyria for help. Instead, he tells him to "remain tranquil & do not fear" because the attack will not succeed & the state of the northern Israel will soon come to an end.

Prophet Isaiah then offers King Ahaz a sign & proceeds to give it even when the King refuses to ask for it. The sign is that a young woman will bear a son whose name is Immanuel, meaning "God is with us." Evidently the name "God is with us" is not a promise that God will shelter the king from all harm if only he has faith. The birth of a child is perhaps the most universal & enduring symbol of hope for the human race. The new born child does not contribute to military defense or help resolve the dilemmas of the crisis, but he is nonetheless a sign of hope for a new generation. Prophet Isaiah's advice to King Ahaz then is to wait out the crisis, trusting not for miraculous deliverance, but for eventual survival. The prophet probably feels that there is no need to fight against Syria & Israel; for the Empire Assyria will take care of them. Sending gifts to the Empire to ask for military assistance is probably also unnecessary & would bring Judah directly into subjection. In any case, the figure of Immanuel is a symbol of hope in weakness, of new life in the midst of destruction.

That's how the early Christians viewed the birth of Jesus & connected with the name Immanuel. They considered the gift of baby Jesus as a symbol of hope & a new life amidst their life challenges. This Sunday's Gospel explains about that Christian view of the birth of Jesus & the figure of Immanuel as following: "... The angel of the Lord appeared in a dream & said to him: 'Joseph, son of David, have no fear about taking Mary as your wife. It is by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived this child. She is to have a son & you are to name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.' All this happened to fulfill what the Lord had said through

the prophet: 'The virgin shall be with child & give birth to a son, & they shall call him Emmanuel,' a name which means 'God is with us.'" So, the early Christians evidently knew about the story in today's first Reading & prophet Isaiah. They were able to connect the birth of Jesus to that story of the Immanuel & consider that precious gift as a sign of God's love & presence in our midst. But, they did not want the birth of Jesus to be the solution for all their problems in the world. They did not expect Jesus to take away their daily troubles or help them defeat the Romans their occupiers. Instead, Jesus gives them the divine love & support that they need to tackle all their life challenges. For years they have heard about God's love & blessings for them through the prophets. Now they can see all of that with their own eyes in the person of Jesus. That gives them new-found confidence & hope to deal with any problem in the world.

As you might know, our lives are full of challenges. We have to deal with health issues, lack of basic necessities, employment problems, broken relationships, family troubles, loss of loved ones, & all kinds of other life problems. Some of us might wish those problems would disappear or someone would take care of them for us. But, most of us would not mind tackling all of life troubles ourselves as long as we have someone who can back us up & lift us up in those difficult time. We do not want other people to live our lives & do things for us. We want to be able to look back on those moments of our lives & feel proud of the hard work & determination that we undertook to deal with them. I don't know about you, but I feel confident and reassured to work on a project when I have someone to back me up. That person can help me come up with a good plan to tackle the project & carry it out. That person also gives me moral support & encouragement that I need if I feel discouraged & want to give up. That is exactly what Jesus would do for us. He would help us figure out how to deal with our life challenges & take care of them. He would give us hope & encouragement when we feel overwhelmed by our life difficulties or want to give up on our life journey. That is what Jesus would bring us at His coming.

My dear brothers & sisters, Jesus might not take away all of our life problems or prevent troubles from coming to us. But, He will give us wisdom & strength to deal with our daily problems. He will bring us hope & encouragement when we feel overwhelmed by those problems & want to give up on our life journey. That is what we're waiting & preparing for in this Advent season. We will not have to tackle life problems all by ourselves. That is what the birth of Jesus or the coming of the Immanuel would mean to us Christians.