

# FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

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## JUSTICE ISSUE: CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE, REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

### SCRIPTURE PASSAGE/ LECTIONARY WEEK:

Isaiah 7:10-16, Matthew 1:18-25

### SOCIAL PRINCIPLES/ BOOK OF RESOLUTIONS REFERENCES:

¶163 The Political Community, Government Responsibilities, B. Civil Disobedience; ¶163 The Political Community, Government Responsibilities, D. The Death Penalty; ¶162 The Social Community, The Nurturing Community, D. Marriage 3. Divorce; ¶162 The Social Community, Other Social Issues, K. Reproductive Health and Abortion

### OBJECTIVE:

Students will learn about biblical prophecy, explore the historical and social context of Isaiah 7:10-16 and Matthew 1:18-25, engage justice issues such as civil disobedience and reproductive health, and respond through creativity, sacred imagination, and art in light of the United Methodist Social Principles.

### SUPPLIES NEEDED:

White poster board or giant sticky note, pens/pencils, markers, stickers, paint and paintbrushes (optional)

## LESSON PLAN STRUCTURE (1 HOUR)

### CENTERING MOMENT (5 MINUTES)

*Opening Prayer (share the prayer below or offer a prayer or invite a student to pray)*

**Prayer:** Dear God, we give you thanks for this fourth week of Advent where we focus on your overwhelming gift of love. Bless our conversations and learnings so that we might learn to love ourselves, one another, and You better. In Your Son's Name we pray, Amen.

### NOTES

On the fourth Sunday of Advent, many churches participate in lighting the Advent wreath during Sunday worship. While the order of candles may look different in each church, traditionally, the fourth week candle is the purple candle of love.

**Optional centering altar:** if your youth group has an Advent wreath, take some time to light it and go through the different candles with your group. If not, you can gather four (3 purple, 1 pink) candles and light them naming that the fourth candle is the purple candle of love which will be the focus for this lesson.

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## SCRIPTURE STUDY (25 MIN.)

Explaining Biblical Prophecy

**Ask:** When you hear the word prophecy, what do you think of? What do you think prophecy means? Any pop culture references about prophecy?

**Say:** A lot of times, Christians think prophecy means predicting the future—like looking into a crystal ball and seeing something that will happen way down the line. But actually, most biblical scholars explain prophecy differently. Prophecy is less about foretelling the far future and more about forthtelling—speaking God’s truth into what’s happening right now, or what’s about to happen soon. Prophets in the Bible weren’t just fortune tellers. They were people who looked at their world, saw what was wrong or unjust, and spoke God’s message into that moment. Their words were rooted in their context—in the real-life situations going on around them

*(Pause for clarifying questions about biblical prophecy)*

**Ask:** How does this understanding of prophecy sit with you? Does it feel new? Do you have tension about it? How does it change what you think of some Scripture?

*Invite someone to read Isaiah 7:10-16 NRSVUE*

**Say:** Here is a little background on the passage that we just read. First, the context. We’re in 8th Century Palestine. The kingdom of Judah—where King Ahaz rules—is really small, and it’s stuck in the middle of political chaos. The huge Assyrian Empire is taking over smaller nations. To fight back, the kings of Damascus and Samaria formed an alliance. They wanted King Ahaz of Judah to join them. But when he refused, they turned on him. This led to the Syro-Ephraimatic War around 734 BCE, when they tried to invade Jerusalem and defeat him.

Now here’s where Isaiah comes in. Isaiah is a prophet, and he often speaks directly to King Ahaz, sometimes blurring his own words with God’s words. His job is to guide and advise the king. In this moment, Isaiah tells Ahaz that God will give him a sign. Now, the word for “sign” here is the same one used when God parted the seas for Moses. So Ahaz probably expected something dramatic, like a big miracle.

## NOTES

### Notes about Biblical Prophecy:

Typically, Christians assume that biblical prophecy is predictive or foretelling about something way off in the future (similar to looking through a crystal ball). However, biblical scholars see biblical prophecy as *forthtelling* or speaking truth to a present situation or in the near future. The work of prophecy through prophets in Scripture is contextual and responsive to what is happening in the present moment, it is being shared.

### Notes about Prophecy in Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:23:

In Matthew 1:23, the angel of the Lord references Isaiah 7:14 saying that through Mary, this prophecy of Isaiah would be fulfilled. Interestingly, the Hebrew word that Isaiah uses is *almah* which means young woman, or sometimes, virgin. In Greek, Matthew uses the word *parthenos* which primarily means virgin (noting there is another Greek word for young woman). In making this translation choice, the words of Isaiah 7:14 take on a new meaning for a very different context centuries later. While this translation choice is not incorrect, it does have an impact on how Christians read the Old Testament text. Mainly, it influences Christians to read Isaiah and other prophets in a “Christo-centric” way meaning that Jesus Christ is read into the Old Testament, instead of seeing those prophets as speaking the truth of God in the present moment.

*Why does this matter?* This matters because we live in a world where antisemitism is very prominent, and one way that we as Christians can honor our Jewish siblings is by acknowledging that their sacred text (“the Old Testament”) offers good news of God’s presence beyond how we tend to read the Old Testament (that everything points to Jesus). Two things can be true! Understanding the historical context of biblical prophecies is one way to respect our Jewish siblings of faith.

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But instead, the sign Isaiah points to is very different—a young woman giving birth to a child. Scholars think this young woman could have been King Ahaz's wife, Isaiah's wife, or simply a young woman in Jerusalem who was already pregnant.

Whoever she was, her child's birth was both ordinary and extraordinary. Ordinary, because children are born every day. Extraordinary, because this child would be a living reminder to Ahaz that God is with us. That's the heart of the prophecy: in the middle of war, fear, and uncertainty, God was still present with God's people.

## Discussion Questions:

- Why might God be giving King Ahaz a sign during this time? What is going on in King Ahaz's life that might require a sign from God?
- Why do you think King Ahaz refuses to ask God for a sign?
- What is the sign that God provides King Ahaz?
- Have you ever received a sign from God? When? What was going on in your life when you received this sign? What did it mean to you?

*Invite someone to read Matthew 1:18-25 NRSVUE*

**Say:** Here is some background on the situation that we find Mary and Joseph. In 1st century Palestine, an engagement wasn't like it is today. Being engaged was actually a legally binding agreement. It meant the couple was already considered husband and wife, even though they weren't yet living together.

So when Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant—and he didn't yet know it was by the Holy Spirit—this was a huge deal. According to the Law of Moses in the book of Deuteronomy, unfaithfulness could lead to capital punishment. That meant Mary and her unborn child could legally be put to death.

The 'right' or 'legal' thing for Joseph to do, according to the law, would have been to expose Mary publicly and have her punished. But Joseph doesn't do that. Instead, he decides to quietly dismiss her.

## NOTES

The background information on Isaiah 7:10-16 comes from *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, *The Queer Bible Commentary*, and *The Women's Bible Commentary*.

The background information on Matthew 1:18-25 comes from *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, *The Queer Bible Commentary*, *The Women's Bible Commentary*, and *The First Nations Version of the Bible*.

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The First Nations Version of the Bible says Joseph didn't want to 'bring Mary trouble and open shame, so he thought about secretly releasing her from the marriage promise.'

That choice came with a cost. If Joseph didn't accuse Mary, people would assume he was the one at fault. When Mary began showing her pregnancy, everyone would think she had been unfaithful—or that Joseph had broken their marriage promises. Either way, the shame would fall on him.

Even still, Joseph chooses compassion over legalism. He chooses the law of love and dignity instead of the law of punishment.

And what's even more powerful? Joseph becomes a father in a completely nontraditional way. He raises a child who isn't biologically his, showing us a countercultural picture of family and faithfulness. Joseph reminds us that family isn't only about biology—it's about love, commitment, and courage.

### Discussion Questions:

- Now that we know the context of Joseph's decision to dismiss Mary, what do you think of Joseph's choice? Would you have done the same or different? Why?
- What do you think of the law of Moses? Why might this rule be in place?
- Have you ever spoken to or heard from God in a dream? Or has a dream impacted your decisions when you woke up? If yes, what was going on in your life when you had this dream?

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## GROUP ACTIVITY (25 MIN.)

### Engaging in Justice and Love (15 minutes)

Read the Social Principles ¶163 The Political Community, Government Responsibilities, B. Civil Disobedience (See Notes 1)

#### Discussion Questions:

- Have you ever heard of civil disobedience? What does it mean to you? What examples do you know of civil disobedience?
- How did Joseph engage in civil disobedience in our Scripture today?
- What rules, systems, or structures in our world today are unfair, cruel, or harmful to human dignity?
- Have you ever engaged in civil disobedience? Is there a particular injustice in the world that you would be willing to resist with civil disobedience? What and how?

*(If time allows)*

**Say:** While we don't see Mary as an active character in this text, we know that she is in a vulnerable position as a woman who is pregnant, not by her legal husband. As United Methodists, we have beliefs of how our faith calls us to support pregnant and birthing people like Mary. Let's explore more!

Read the Social Principles ¶162 The Social Community, Other Social Issues, K. Reproductive Health and Abortion

#### Discussion Questions:

- How do you think we as people of faith should respond to folks like Mary who are pregnant and economically disadvantaged?
- What systems, policies, laws would help vulnerable women like Mary in their pregnancy and post-birth (regardless of what the partner decides)?

### Signs and Dreams (10 minutes)

## NOTES

**Notes 1:** If you want to explore the two options that Joseph had in response to Mary (death penalty/divorce), you can see what United Methodists think for our modern context in the Social Principles: Political Community | Government Responsibilities | D. The Death Penalty & The Social Community | The Nurturing Community | D. Marriage 3. Divorce.

**Instructions to share about Civil Disobedience:** Whether Joseph knew it or not, he was engaging in civil disobedience. This section of the group activity is an opportunity for the students to look closer at what we think about civil disobedience as United Methodists and see how Joseph engaged in this work.

**Examples of civil disobedience:** attending protests or marches, boycotting, sit-ins, disrupting a political event

**Examples in history to research:** Nonviolent civil disobedience during the Civil Rights Movement with the Montgomery bus boycott, the march from Selma for voting rights, the Freedom Rides, the March on Washington, to list a few.

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**Supplies:** Poster board/giant sticky pad, markers, stickers

**Say:** As we think about these two Scriptures, we see that God spoke to King Ahaz with the sign of the birth of a child and Joseph with a dream that Mary would have a child by the Holy Spirit. Whether you have personally experienced God speaking through signs and dreams, the truth is that God can speak to us through ordinary and extraordinary moments, through whispers and shouts, through small or big experiences, through people, places, or words.

For the next 15 minutes, we are going to be creative and use stickers, markers (whatever art materials you have) to create a poster of “dreams and signs” of God’s presence and God’s love in our world.

You can write words, draw pictures, place stickers to create. It can be something more personal to you and your faith for how God shows up. It could be in reference to our Scripture texts and/or the United Methodist Social Principles. It could be in response to our conversation about civil disobedience as God’s love and/or justice for birthing people and children as God’s love. Whatever you want! Let’s just create on this big paper what signs and dreams of God’s love looks like!

## CLOSING MOMENT (5 MIN)

**Say:** We are going to engage in a spiritual practice called sacred imagination. The following words are written in the first-person perspective through the eyes of Joseph just as he woke up from the dream he had with the angel of the Lord. As I read, imagine these words being shared by Joseph. Imagine you are in his shoes, having just decided to dismiss Mary quietly and instead being confronted by an angel of the Lord in a dream. Imagine what you would be feeling or what you would do if you were Joseph. After I read, I will ask a closing question and pray us out. So I invite you to get comfortable and listen to these imagined words from Joseph, the father of Jesus, as he woke up from his dream.

**Read:** Sacred Imagination through the Eyes of Joseph

When I woke up the next day, I opened my eyes and started to remember the dream

## NOTES

Sacred Imagination through the Eyes of Joseph is an adapted excerpt from a sermon written by Rev. Maddie Johnson on December 8, 2019.

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I just had... it felt so real-- this angel of the Lord felt as near to me as the bed I was laying on. I could barely process what the angel was asking me to do.

Was I really about to say “yes” and not be afraid? Was I really about to say “yes” and take this leap of faith and take Mary as my wife and raise a son who is not mine? Was I really about to say “yes” to trusting that it would all be okay and that God would be with me in this?

I had no idea what this “yes” would mean for me. I didn’t know if this dream was an actual encounter with God like so many encounters in Scripture or if this was a bizarre dream of my own making.

If I say yes, I don’t know if my family will support or abandon Mary and me. If I say yes, I don’t know if the town will reject us or if we will be safe in Bethlehem or Nazareth.

As I started to wake up more, I suddenly felt this moment of peace. While I didn’t necessarily know what was right, I felt so clearly what was God.

When it came to choosing between the law and God, I was going to choose God. When it came to choosing between what was right and what was love, I was going to choose love. When it came to choosing between the rational and the mystery, I was going to choose the mystery.

I was ready to say “yes” to God.

**Closing Question:** As you listened to these words, what emotions came up for you? Or what emotions would you feel if you were Joseph? Examples: Fear, resolve, peace, conviction, hope, etc.

**Closing Prayer:** God with us, we lift up all of these emotions shared (popcorn share as many as you remember being shared.) Though we are not Joseph, we pray that Your Spirit might grant us peace and clarity to make hard decisions like he did. In moments when the “right thing” feels complicated, we pray for the courage to choose love, even if it means going against friends, family, our church, or structures in our community. As Advent draws to a close, help us to see that You are always with us in our waiting and prepare our hearts for the good news that comes with Jesus’ birth. Amen.