



Advent 4, Year A

Pastor Sarah Schaaf, Northwestern Ohio Synod

Assistant to the Bishop for Community Engagement and Emerging Church

The Fourth Sunday of Advent: Gospel Text – Matthew 1:18-25

Matthew 1:18-25

¹⁸ 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 pregnant from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ “Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,”

which means, “God is with us.” ²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had given birth to a son, and he named him Jesus.

SERMON TEXT:

Tom's workshop was more orderly than my kitchen. There was "a place for every tool and every tool was in its place." They hung on the walls—different colors, different sizes, perfectly aligned, well-conditioned, ready...almost *inviting* us to use them. The room smelled of sawdust and varnish. Stacks of wood sat waiting in the corner. It was the kind of space that invited creativity—but the methodical kind, where you measure twice and cut once. And yet, for some reason, Tom had agreed to welcome a gaggle of teenagers into his pristine workshop.

Of course, I knew why. He wanted us to be prepared. That summer we were traveling to West Virginia to volunteer with the Appalachia Service Project, doing home repairs. This was one of our training events. Basic Carpentry 101. With some luck and a lot of prayer, we would build a couple of picnic tables by the end of the day.

Still, I briefly felt the urge to whisper to our usually rowdy teens, "Don't touch anything!"—but I resisted. It seemed counter intuitive. Some of these kids had never held a hammer before. The goal was to get their hands a bit callused. I just hoped everyone would leave with all ten fingers.

And then right before we began, it happened. They arrived— A crowd of older men filtered in as if on cue. I looked around and saw every trustee in our congregation's recent history.

Unbeknownst to me, Tom had recruited them all for service. I watched as each one instinctively paired up with a teenager, whispering instructions over their shoulders, guiding their hands on power tools, belly-laughing at the occasional bright pink hammer. "I gotta get me one of these!" someone exclaimed. Before long picnic tables began to take shape before our eyes.

I wish I could have heard the pitch that convinced these fellas to show up. What exactly did Tom tell them was the project? What had convinced them to come? Did they know what they were building that day? I believe they did—certainly more than picnic tables.

It remains one of my favorite memories of my first call. By then I had been their pastor for nearly a decade, long enough to recognize their actions as both highly unusual and yet at the same time utterly consistent with who I knew them to be. These men were stewards. They were builders. Most often that instinct led them to care for our church *building*, but on that day, it led them to care for our church *body*—our youth.

Joseph is described in Scripture as a righteous man—a descendant of the house and line of David. He is devoted to God, faithful to the law, and committed to living ethically. Joseph does the right thing with quiet, steady precision. He is honest and hardworking, not the kind of person to make waves or draw attention to himself. He finds deep satisfaction in following the rules, in discerning what is just, and in practicing fairness.

I imagine his workshop was immaculate: *“a place for every tool and every tool in its place.”* Joseph strikes me as a *“measure twice, cut once”* kind of man.

And all he desires in return for his faithfulness is a “normal,” uncomplicated life. To build a home with Mary in Nazareth. To raise their children together. To teach his son his trade, so that his family line—the line of David—will carry on for generations. It isn’t an unusual dream. It’s the kind of dream any of us might have if we were in his shoes. A simple life doesn’t seem like too much to ask for a righteous man of God, does it?

But then God enters the scene—and God turns Joseph’s world upside down. Did you catch that? It is *God* who complicates Joseph’s otherwise orderly life. It is the Holy One who disrupts Joseph’s carefully laid plans. Joseph goes to bed one night dreaming of a simple future with Mary, and he wakes up the next morning to discover his fiancée is pregnant.

And suddenly, there are no uncomplicated options... at least not for a righteous man.

- If he calls attention to Mary's pregnancy, she could be stoned. That is what the law prescribes. But is *that* what a righteous man would do?
- If he dismisses her quietly, she could be shunned—left to beg, or worse, simply to survive with her child. Is *that* what a righteous man would do?
- If, on the other hand, he marries her, Mary's child becomes his heir. He would relinquish his lineage to a child who is not his blood. His reputation would be marked by scandal—Mary's pregnancy and the unbelievable, perhaps even blasphemous, claim that she is carrying the Son of God. Is *that* what a righteous man would do?

What does righteousness look like when God shows up and turns your orderly world upside down? Maybe it's a question you've asked yourself. I know I have. Because I've noticed—in Scripture and in my own life—that God has a way of doing exactly this. And it is rarely comfortable. God's presence has a way of redirecting our well-crafted plans. Suddenly we have to listen again, dream again, and do our best to discern anew what it means to be faithful to a God whose plans are not our own.

Righteous Joseph adjusts. He resolves to dismiss Mary quietly, and then he falls asleep—and a new directive comes to him, not in a diagram but in a dream. An angel of the Lord appears and says:

“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. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³ “Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”

And Joseph wakes up and does the most surprising thing—he is faithful to God and to Mary. He obeys the angel’s command and that decision reorders his life.

Before the story is finished, this carpenter—who relied on well-worn tools and careful calculation—will learn to listen to dreams and angelic beings. He will...

- Offer his protection and family line to a child who is not his.
- Forfeit his right to name his firstborn son.
- Abandon his home and flee as a refugee to a foreign land to protect God’s child from the jealous wrath of Herod.

Joseph’s actions are both highly unusual and yet at the same time utterly consistent with who God has created Joseph to be. Joseph is a steward. He is a builder. In the past, that instinct led him to work with stone and wood, crafting homes where people could dwell. But now God has someone for Joseph to steward, and

what he will build for Jesus—the Son of God—is not a structure of timber or stone, but a *future*.

After chapter 2 of Matthew's Gospel, Joseph is never mentioned again. Many scholars believe he died before Jesus began his public ministry. But Joseph's story is recorded here at the beginning of Matthew's gospel so that we may know what Godly righteousness looks like.

It can look like...

- Faithfully stepping into a story whose ending you cannot yet see...
- It may call you to reorient your life and vocation around building something that is not yours to possess...
- It might even ask you to offer all that you have—your name, your lineage, even your freedom—to a child who was not born so that you might be remembered...

And so here on the cusp of Christmas we pause to hear the messy story of Joseph the father of Jesus--the Son of God. And we give thanks for all those we know who reflect his likeness....

- those who have learned that power and strength can be used to protect the vulnerable
- those who understand that justice is more than adhering to the letter of the law
- those who build and dream even when it disrupts their plans...even when life is messy

- those who trust that if they are faithful to God, God will guide them to build something that will live on through others.

May the Holy One turn your world upside down to build a different future.

In Christ's name. Amen.

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