

4Advent, Matthew 1:18-25
Rev. Kimberly Glenn
December 21, 2025

O Lord God, we will never turn away from you. We give you thanks for the light of Christ that ever leads us where you want us to go. Amen.

In this fast-moving world that we live in, filled with constantly flowing news and information, it is a blessing to have moments like these in church where we can slow down for a minute, catch our breath, and have a chance to recenter ourselves. The world is so full of noise it seems. It is profoundly special to be able to take a few focused moments of quiet in this space, to treasure the angel inspired music and just be. I know some folks stay at home to find that kind of peace, but there is something special and sacred about finding that peace in church.

It is special and sacred to hear the word of God read in church. They are words that can pierce us deeply if we let them. They are words filled with layers - not of noise, but of meaning.

The words we hear from Matthew's Gospel today are Matthew's version of Jesus' birth story. In contrast to the words, we will hear on Christmas Eve from the Gospel of Luke, there is no manger here in Matthew's gospel, there are no shepherds in this text and Mary the mother of Jesus is not a prominent character until the very end of the reading. You really cannot have a nativity story without Mary, but the focus of Matthew's nativity story is Joseph.

This particular nativity story reminds us that there were unusual circumstances at play concerning the birth of Jesus, and that Joseph played an integral role in God's purposes here. This text tells us how the nativity happened from Matthew's perspective. We hear from the text that Joseph and Mary were engaged to be married. Their

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engagement was likely an arranged one, an agreement had likely been reached between both families long before, maybe even when they were children. The engagement was more or less a financial merger between the two families. Mary's parents made a promise that Mary would bring with her into the marriage the most valuable assets her parents could provide. In return Joseph's parents would be assured that there would be heirs. There had likely been legal documents signed between the two families and a date would have been set for the marriage about a year away from the formal engagement. That was the custom and tradition in Mary and Joseph's culture. It was a culture very much anchored around tradition and maintaining purity within the Hebrew people. Both Mary and Joseph's families were faithful Jews. Theirs with a culture of faith and purity, but it was also a culture that publicly celebrated honor and publicly punished shame. There were expectations in Joseph and Mary's marital arrangement that went to great lengths to avoid shame.

So when it became clear that Mary was "with child," Joseph must have felt an immediate sense of panic. Breaking off the engagement would have been a spectacle to say the least. From the reaction that Matthew reported that Joseph decided to dismiss Mary quietly, it seems that Joseph must have already grown quite fond of her. The cultural response would normally have demanded that Mary be stoned to death. But Joseph did not want that. In the dream he had, the angel affirmed that Joseph should proceed with the marriage and not submit Mary to humiliation - or worse.

As God had been shown to do throughout scripture, God had chosen the right person to carry out his intentions. God's intentions were to enter into the human world,

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to affirm that human beings are the vessels He has chosen to bring His dream for the world into being. There had to be a man, a male human being, who would assent to a child entering the world in this possibly scandalous way. God found that man in Joseph.

Another man might well have given Mary over to stoning in order to save his own reputation. What kind of man would that be? We can imagine that such a man would be one who lacked humility, one who was consumed with what others thought of him. Such a man might have made a very different choice than Joseph did. Matthew calls Joseph righteous. From scripture we know that God had chosen a righteous man for a test of faith once before.

Joseph was a man who would have grown up learning the stories of the Hebrew Bible. From Hebrew tradition, he would have known what righteousness was. In the Hebrew Bible, the Bible that we call the Old Testament, God had referred to Abraham as righteous. Abraham was revered as the father of the Hebrew faith. In the genealogy that Matthew outlined for Joseph, Abraham appears as one of Joseph's ancestors. Like Abraham, Joseph was obedient to what he perceived was God's call on him. He was responsive to God's call on his life in the way that Abraham had been. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, they say. So, Matthew referred to Joseph as righteous.

There was another Joseph in the Bible. He showed up in the Old Testament, too. The Old Testament Joseph was the great grandson of Abraham. He was the son of Abraham's grandson Jacob and his wife Rachel. The Old Testament Joseph was known for his dreams. Jacob revered his son Joseph because the dreams he shared somehow guided Jacob to make good decisions. Jacob and Joseph followed the will of God for

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them that was laid out in Joseph's dreams. You might recall that the Old Testament Joseph has been called Joseph who had a coat of many colors. The Old Testament Joseph had dreams that proved to not only save him from an early death, but to save a nation and his own family from starvation.

Matthew connected the Joseph who was engaged to Mary to the Joseph of the Old Testament to remind us that God can and does communicate with us through dreams. God communicated through a dream that Joseph, who was betrothed to Mary, needed to proceed with marrying her even though she was pregnant. Because of Joseph's faith, and maybe because of his knowledge of the earlier Joseph who dreamed dreams, he trusted the angel's message. Joseph decided that he would marry and take care of Mary and the as yet unborn child. He would raise the child as if that child were his own.

Joseph speaks no words in the telling of this story, but his actions speak volumes. His actions allowed the baby Jesus to come into the world. Joseph's actions allowed God to come into the world. We adore Mary for the loving and faithful role that she played in carrying and giving birth to Jesus. She was the one person who was with Jesus from cradle to grave. Joseph doesn't show up much in the story after Jesus is born, but we owe a lot of respect and gratitude to Joseph for his courage and compassion in seeing Mary through this birth. Joseph was so faithful, so obedient, trusting of God's guidance that he carried on despite not knowing how anything would turn out. He cared deeply for Mary, and he cared deeply for God. The trust, the blind trust, Joseph demonstrated in following God's call on his life serves as a model for us.

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What might God be calling us to do? What might God be calling you to do? Are you able to sit quietly enough to hear what God is saying to you? We say in Advent that we are preparing room in our hearts for Jesus. When Jesus ascended after his death to be with God he said that he would prepare a room for us in the heavenly kingdom so that where he is we will also be. Why not prepare a room for him in our hearts? When we do we know that wherever we are here on earth, he will also be. When you welcome Him into your heart, Jesus will help you not only hear God calling you, but He will help you to act out that calling. Even if you don't know where God's call will lead you, like Joseph, trust God, and trust that Jesus will walk with you in the journey that God has laid out for you.