

Advent IV  
Matthew 1:18-25  
December 20, 2020  
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On the night before I left to fly home for Christmas during my freshman year of college, I had a dream in which I was already home, walking through that old back door into a house I knew so well. Crossing the threshold felt the same as ever, but within a few steps I began to notice that the rooms looked different: the kitchen table was repositioned, a favorite bookshelf had disappeared, a bedroom had become a den. The further in I walked, the bigger the changes, until I found myself on an entirely new floor, a brand-new section of a house I thought I knew completely.

The message of the dream – about changes and their accompanying anxieties - felt obvious even then. What I have never forgotten is the feeling of wandering through a landscape I expected to be familiar and finding it utterly strange.

Today we are journeying through similar terrain. It is the fourth Sunday of Advent. Christmas is nearly here. The trees are lit. The poinsettias are in place. Four candles burn brightly on the wreath. And yet today is utterly strange. In any other year the pews would be full. You would be here. There would be extra musicians in the choir loft for our beloved Lessons and Carols service. There would be a buzz to the room, special cookies at coffee hour. It is achingly familiar and yet utter strange to navigate Advent's anticipation alongside 300,000 deaths, hospitals at capacity, a year containing so much lasting trauma.

In hopes of finding secure ground on which to plant our steps, Pastor Dane and I have chosen central characters of the season to accompany us each Sunday: John the Baptist, Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary, Jesus's mother, and today, Joseph, Jesus's human father. Each familiar story rendered strange in this difficult year, viewed with new eyes and newly acquired angle. Joseph might be the one most able to sympathize with our sense of dislocation, as he awoke one day to find his heart broken, his trust in tatters, and his future in disarray. Joseph has a story to tell us about upended expectations and about how to listen for God when life appears to have betrayed you.

Matthew is the sole gospel writer who imagines the announcement of Jesus's birth through Joseph's eyes. Attention typically lies elsewhere, particularly with Mary, whose hopeful acceptance of Angel Gabriel's announcement nudges us toward the rosy, nurturing images of a mother-to-be. Joseph appears almost as an accessory. In manger scenes he is often behind Mary, taking the role of supporting spouse. In nativity paintings, he's liable to be left out entirely in favor of the mother and child, all aglow. If the Holy Spirit has overshadowed Mary, and the world needs Jesus, its savior, of what good is Joseph? When our son was three days old, my husband looked at me and said, with a sense of helpless bordering on despair, "Really, right now, he just needs you." Appearing only in Jesus's infancy and childhood, and even then, not uttering a word, Joseph appears the quiet one in the corner, outshined by more prominent

players. Yet much about Jesus's identity and future depend upon Joseph. And if we stay in the world where Jesus's birthday is December 25<sup>th</sup>, then he, like us, woke up one March morning to a familiar world made utterly strange and faced the task of finding a faithful response.

As the scene opens, Joseph is engaged to Mary. Engagement in Biblical times was not a romantic proposal, ring and champagne, but a legally binding arrangement, more akin to marriage in our modern day - except that the couple does not yet share a household. They are engaged but living apart, waiting for that last step of their union, when Mary tells him she is pregnant by a conception born of the Holy Spirit. Can we imagine the conversation? Mary trying to describe the angel Gabriel's visit, attempting to assure Joseph her pregnancy is authored by God? Joseph responding from his own knowledge of how conception happens, what fidelity in a relationship entails. Mary is still grappling herself with her new status of favored of God. Joseph is struggling to wrap his heart around the fact that his fiancé is pregnant with a child that is not his. What does one say or do or feel when your life changes this dramatically, when what you've hoped for, planned for, and wanted vanishes before your eyes?

Jewish law offers Joseph a course of action, a prescription of what to do when one's engagement has been so utterly altered. That righteous move is toward divorce. The divorce proceedings could be public or private but either way, an ending to their coupled future is expected. Mary, legally speaking, is in a precarious situation, almost certainly destined for embarrassment, and quite likely, facing being ostracized by her community. Joseph feels pressure to remain in the righteous realm, to keep himself in good standing by letting go of his errant would-be bride. Joseph, displaying a kindness alongside his adherence with the law, plans to dismiss her quietly. As preacher Sam Wells points out, "we should not underestimate the tortured emotions buried within this simple description."<sup>1</sup> Let's assume that Joseph loved Mary, had hopes for their future, and now was deciding what to do amid layers of shock, hurt, and grief. What would we do when our life plans are in ruins, our trust has been broken, and the options ahead of us can only mitigate the catastrophe but not mend it?

It is the night after Joseph has made his decision that God intervenes, with a message delivered by an angel speaking into his dreams. Do not be afraid. This child is God's. He and his mother need you. God's plan to come among us on earth needs Mary, yes, and your participation also. There is a role in God's grand drama for you to play. Miraculously, Joseph trusted the dream.

2020 has been a year of interrupted sleep, dashed plans, and broken dreams. Like Joseph, we have been confronted with events in which we were not the main actors, but the lowly ones stuck in our homes, helplessly watching the larger drama that affects our lives unfold. Unlike Joseph, there is not an angel saying "this is good news in disguise," for no one can put a bright bow on deaths, inequity, and loss after loss. But there is always the Spirit of God reminding us not to be afraid, telling us God seeks to come down to live amongst us on earth, and that we have a role to play. God still labors to be with us. How are we, children of Mary and Joseph, listening – and trusting - this divine dream?

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<sup>1</sup> Wells, Samuel, "The Godfather" A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 19, 2010.

In the universal church, icons of Joseph call him the Betrothed. The Betrothed, as if Joseph is forever suspended in this engagement period – caught between the life he imagined and the life handed to him - endlessly having to choose to play his role in the life- story of God. Is this not the space where all God's faithful ones are suspended? Each of us are asked make our choices, aided by dreams assuring us that while the familiar has been rendered utterly strange, God is still moving, still daring us to dream, asking us to trust the dreams of this with-us-forever God.

There is a small chapel in Santa Fe, New Mexico, built in the late 1800's to house a sisterhood of nuns, who ran a school.<sup>2</sup> The architect who built the chapel, called Loretto Chapel, created a beautiful light-filled, gothic space with a choir loft in the balcony at the sanctuary rear. The builder died before constructing a way to access the loft. The sisters were left with the dilemma of finding a way to build a path up to the loft. The chapel was too small for a regular staircase. And a ladder was deemed too unsafe. Caught without an obvious solution, like faithful disciples, the sisters prayed. One day a stranger appeared, a carpenter, who built a spiral staircase between nave and loft with simple tools, wooden pegs, and wood that not native to the American Southwest. The staircase had two 360 degree turns and no center pole for structural support. It was unheard of at the time and remains an architectural marvel today. When the carpenter finished, he disappeared, without leaving his name or receiving payment. The sisters asked around, trying to learn his identity, but never discovered who mysteriously came to their aid. Eventually, they decided Joseph had interceded, enabling yet again a path to be created, when every conceivable option seemed unavailable. I like the think Joseph's spirit is still among us, making a way in spaces of shattered dreams or broken hearts, encouraging us to trust the dreams given to us by God, reminding us of the angel's words. Do not be afraid. There is a role for you to play. There is a child on the way who is God with us. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.lorettochapel.com>.