



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON RICHARD C. WEYLS, COMMUNITY LIFE & SENIOR ASSOCIATE RECTOR

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT, DECEMBER 21, 2025

ISAIAH 7:10-16; PSALM 80:1-7, 16-18; ROMANS 1:1-7; MATTHEW 1:18-25

THE MESS IS THE PLACE WHERE GOD IS BORN

***Matthew 1:18-25** [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 with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.]*

I have always said that Advent is my favorite liturgical season. Who wouldn't like a season that's all about preparing for Christmas? When I was a child, that meant studying the Sears Christmas Wish Book to identify toys that Santa might bring me. As I got older, I concentrated more upon preparing my heart for Christ to come anew at Christmas. This year I was hoping to sit in the dark and wait in contemplation while being surrounded by joy and

peace. But several things happened in my life right before Advent that threw that plan out the window. I was sitting in the dark, alright, but rather than hope and expectation I was feeling anxiety and dread. Why did I think that sitting in the dark and waiting would be comfortable experience?

So, I decided to attend the Advent Quiet Morning with The Very Rev. Kate Moorehead Carroll. She was excellent

and I listened attentively to everything she said. She asked us to reflect on this question. "How is God with me in my suffering?" I wrote in my journal. "My mind is a mess." Things have improved a bit since then, but I still feel that my mind, my life, and our world are a mess.

Every third year, our lectionary turns its spotlight away from Mary and gives us the perspective of her would-be husband, a quiet, unassuming descendant of the House of David. So, our entry point into the Nativity story on this fourth Sunday of Advent is Joseph, a quiet carpenter who upends his good life for a dream.

If we are tempted to sideline Joseph as a minor character in the Christmas narrative, the Gospel of Matthew reminds us that in fact, Joseph's role in Jesus's arrival is pivotal. It is his willingness to lean into the impossible, to embrace the scandalous, to abandon his notions of holiness in favor of God's messy plan of salvation, that allows the miracle of Christmas to unfold. As Matthew makes clear, the Messiah *must* come from the house and lineage of David, and so it rests on Joseph to give *his* name and his legitimacy to Mary's child. If Joseph refuses, the fulfillment of prophecy comes to a halt.

The Gospel describes Joseph as a "righteous man," which is to say, a man devoted to God, and concerned with clean, ethical living. Though Matthew doesn't elaborate, I think we can safely assume that Mary's betrothed is a nice guy who wants a simple, orderly life in a difficult world. He's honest and hardworking. He follows the rules. He practices justice and fairness, and all he wants in exchange is a normal, uncomplicated life.

As Matthew tells the story, the God-fearing carpenter wakes up one morning to find that his world has shattered. His fiancée is pregnant, he knows for sure that he is not the father, and suddenly, he has no good options to choose from. If he calls attention to Mary's out-of-wedlock pregnancy, she might be stoned to death, as Levitical law proscribes. If he divorces her quietly, she'll be reduced to begging or prostitution to support herself and the child. If, on the other hand, he marries her, her son will be Joseph's heir, instead of his own biological child. Moreover, Joseph will be tainted forever by the scandal of Mary's illicit pregnancy, and by her unusual claim that the baby's dad is somehow God.

We make a grave mistake, I think, when we sanitize Joseph's consent. We distort

his humanity when we assume that his acceptance of God's plan came easily, when we hold ourselves at arm's length from his humiliation and doubt. In fact, what Joseph's pain shows me is that God's favor is not the shiny, beautiful thing I'd like to believe it is. It's not the God of the New Testament who promises wealth, health, comfort, and ease to his chosen ones.

In choosing Joseph to be Jesus's earthly father, God led a righteous man with an impeccable reputation straight into doubt, shame, scandal, and controversy. God's call required Joseph to reorder everything he thought he knew about fairness, justice, goodness, and purity. It required him to embrace a mess he had not created. To love a woman whose story he didn't understand, to protect a baby he didn't father, and to accept an heir who was not his son.

In other words, God's messy plan of salvation required Joseph — a quiet, cautious, guy — to choose precisely what he feared and dreaded most. The fraught, the complicated, the suspicious, and the inexplicable. So much for living a well-ordered life.

Then again, Joseph's story gives me hope. I can't relate to a person who mindlessly leaps headlong into obedience. I *can* relate, however, to a

person who struggles, to a person whose "yes" to God is cautious, ambivalent, and scared. I'm grateful that Joseph's choice was a hard one. I'm glad he struggled, because I struggle, too. And my life can feel like a mess.

Interestingly, in the verses that immediately precede our Gospel reading, Matthew gives us a genealogy of Jesus's ancestors. He mentions Abraham — the patriarch who abandoned his son, Ishmael, and twice endangered his wife's safety so that he could save his own skin. He mentions Jacob, the trickster usurper who humiliated his older brother. He mentions David, who slept with another man's wife and then ordered that man's murder to protect his own reputation. He mentions Tamar, who pretended to be a sex worker, and Rahab, who was one. These are just a few representative samples.

Do you notice the messiness? The complication? Scandal? Sin? How interesting that God, who could have chosen any genealogy for his Son, chose a long line of brokenness, imperfection, dishonor, and scandal. It's the perfect backdrop, I suppose, for God's beautiful works of restoration, healing, hope, and second chances.

There is much to ponder in the Nativity story — much to consider about the surprising ways of God. What kind of God brings salvation into the world through a young woman whose story about her own sex life was not believed? What kind of God brings salvation into the world through a well-meaning man who had to let go of righteousness to follow God? Through a cultural system obsessed with male honor and female purity? What kind of God brings salvation into the world through a poor, helpless, illegitimate baby of color?

No wonder that the angel Gabriel's first words to Joseph were, "Do not be afraid." If we want to enter into God's messy story, then perhaps these are the first words we need to hear, too. *Do not be afraid.* Do not be afraid when God's

work in your life looks alarmingly different than you thought it would. Do not be afraid when God upends your cherished assumptions about righteousness. Do not be afraid when God asks you to stand alongside the scandalous, the defiled, the suspected, and the shamed. Do not be afraid when God asks you to love something or someone more than your own spotless reputation. Do not be afraid of the precarious, the fragile, the vulnerable, and the impossible.

Most importantly, do not be afraid of the mess. The mess is the place where God is born.



SAINT MARK'S
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