

## ADVENT FOUR, YEAR A, DECEMBER 21, 2025

The nativity of Jesus is probably the most depicted scene in Western Art. It has been expressed in paintings, sculptures, stained glass and a host of other artistic mediums. These renderings not only express the time period in which they were produced but also the artists interpretation of the scriptures as well.

How do you think a 21<sup>st</sup> century interpretation of the nativity would look? Well, a few years ago I saw a picture of a modern day creche done in molded plastic with everyone in modern dress. It still had a stable but the stable had solar panels on it. The cow in the stable had a 100% beef label stamped on it. The shepherd had airpods in his ears listening to some angelic rock music and the sheep had on a Christmas sweater. The three wisemen were on Segway's carrying amazon packages and Mary and Joseph were kneeling by the baby Jesus in the manger. Mary had a starbucks coffee in one hand and giving the peace sign with the other while Joseph was taking a selfie of the three of them with his iphone.

Some of you might find that irreligious but I thought it was great. It appeals to my sense of humor. But the point is we are always interpreting or reinterpreting the Christmas story. And remember that there are two very distinct Christmas stories in the gospels that have very little in common with each other except for Mary, Joseph and Jesus. Over the years the two have been molded into one story.

In Matthew's gospel, it is Joseph who is the prominent character. The genealogy listed is that of Joseph's and it is Joseph who is visited by an angel in a dream and told to marry Mary which is today's gospel story. Jesus is born in a house and Joseph names Jesus. And it is Joseph who subsequently has dreams that tell him to flee to Egypt and when to return. His story is pretty cut and dry.

Unfortunately, Joseph's story gets told today pretty much like an afterthought. But even though Joseph is usually overlooked our gospel asks us to look closely at him and his response. 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. 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.

For Joseph, the news that Mary was pregnant was anything but good at first. In fact, it must have been quite a shock, because he knew the child could not be his. In those days, there were two steps leading to marriage. The first was betrothal. This was a legally binding period that lasted a year before the couple actually married and started living together. If anything happens during the betrothal to dissolve the relationship, it's legally the same as getting a divorce. Mary and Joseph are in this first stage, legally bound to one another, awaiting the day of their marriage. So when Joseph finds out that Mary is pregnant, it is not good news. It's bad news, very bad news because of the choice Joseph has to make.

The choice that Joseph faces stuns him. Mary, his betrothed, is either an adulteress or a woman, as she has said, been visited by the Spirit of God. Betrothal meant contractual agreements had been made; which only a court could undo. So Joseph considers his options. Legally, he has two.

He can seek a public divorce. And while preserving his good name, this choice proves deadly for Mary. The law prescribed that an adulteress woman be stoned to death in the streets, before all the people.

Joseph's other option? A private divorce: no blame assigned; no public trial. This choice still condemns Mary to life as an outcast, a beggar living on the margins of society, struggling to provide for herself and for her child.

Faced with a mess not of his own making; disappointed, betrayed, hurt; caught in a bind between his contractual agreement with Mary and loving Scripture, Joseph struggles. As a righteous man, he cannot see beyond legal options but as a good man, he has no desire to cause unnecessary pain. Joseph resolves to put Mary quietly aside.

Then something extraordinary happens to this ordinary, righteous man. Joseph has a dream, and in this dream an angel of the Lord says, "Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her womb 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."

So God intervenes and sends a messenger to give Joseph another option. Basically what God says to Joseph is that the decision he has made to quietly divorce her is not good enough. Having compassion and righteousness is just not good enough. The angel is telling him he needs to exceed righteousness and to choose mercy.

Mercy is the most encompassing movement of God's heart. Mercy is an outpouring of costly love. Mercy is unexpected evidence of God's gracious generosity. Yet, how does Joseph respond to this extraordinary news?

God's call required Joseph to reorder everything he thought he knew about fairness, justice, goodness, and purity. It required him to become the talk of the town — and *not* in a good way. It required him to embrace a mess he had not created. To marry a woman whose story he didn't understand, to protect a baby he didn't father, to accept an heir who was not his son.

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

Then again, Joseph's story gives me hope. It's hard to relate to a person who leaps headlong into obedience. I *can* relate, however, to a person who struggles, to a person whose "yes" is cautious, ambivalent, and scared. I'm grateful that Joseph's choice was a hard one. I'm glad he struggled, because I struggle as we all do.

So Joseph took Mary as his wife and named their child Jesus. Joseph, an ordinary man, a faithful man, did what the Lord commanded him to do. He had been doing it his entire life. By doing what God asked Joseph protected Mary and Jesus and raised him with the eyes and heart of God.

Think about this too; Joseph will live with the consequences of this choice for the rest of his life. A carpenter in a small town, people can and will do the math. In our day, with so many children born outside of marriage, Joseph's dilemma may seem trivial or quaint and his choice and courage insignificant. Yet, in his day, Joseph extends to Mary and to her unborn son, God's own child, an exceptional and excessive mercy.

He will bear her shame and humiliation. He will share the disgrace and the disdain that will surely come. He will leave family and home, friends and livelihood, to protect Mary and her son.

The wonder of this story is that through Joseph's eventual, faithful response, God brought Christ into the world. It's a story that tells us it doesn't take extraordinary people to bring God into our midst. Just as Joseph dared to believe the promise of God's messenger; that mercy can transform mess so should we dare to believe God is with us.

Remember like Joseph, we struggle to make the right decisions in life too, seeking deep down to do what is right. If we want to enter into God's messy story, then perhaps the first words we need to hear, too are *Do not be afraid*. Do not be afraid when God's work in your life looks alarmingly different than you thought it would or when God upends your cherished assumptions about what is right and wrong. 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, the impossible.

Do not be afraid of the mess because the mess is the place where God is born. God's messenger said and continues to say - even today. "Don't be afraid." Immanuel - God is with us. Amen.