

4th Sunday of Advent (Year A)

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.

Today is our fourth and final stop on our Advent journey, asking ourselves “What Can’t Wait?” In just over 48 hours, we’ll gather together in this very room to sing “Joy to the World” and “Silent Night,” finally lighting that long-awaited Christ candle to welcome the baby Jesus into our arms.

But just in case you’ve missed a few stops on this Advent train, allow me to catch you up.

During our first stop on the first day of this month and the first day of a new liturgical year, we talked about how “God’s Promised Day Can’t Wait.” We journeyed through the poetry of Isaiah 2:1-5 and Psalm 122, which reminded us that God longs for the day when weapons will be destroyed and turned into gardening tools, cultivating a world in which war and violence are things of the past.

On our second stop, we talked about how “Repentance Can’t Wait.” We journeyed in the wilderness with John the Baptist reminding us that God takes repentance very seriously. We were told that repentance is an important task to practice as we prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, we were challenged to practice repentance not with a sense of guilt and shame but rather to welcome it with open arms as a necessary step in order to find joy; joy for ourselves and joy for our neighbors.

On our third stop, a week ago today, we talked about how “Delight Can’t Wait.” We were enchanted and challenged by the subversive and controversial words of Mary’s Magnificat, celebrating that God will bring down the mighty and uplift the lowly, and indeed already has. We pondered in our hearts how we too might be called to sing our own Magnificats in order to sing into reality God’s promised day.

Which, of course, brings us to the fourth Sunday of Advent. The day when we light the candle for love. But the title of this sermon is not “Love Can’t Wait” but “Courage Can’t Wait.” I think it makes perfect sense. After all, is there any more courageous act than love? Is it even possible to love without courage? Of course not.

Last week, the courageous act belonged to Mary. She, a brown-skinned unwed teenage girl from the Middle East, chose to sing a subversive and political song of God's countercultural justice. Today, however, the courageous act belongs to her fiancé, Joseph, who, like Mary, is swept up into circumstances that none of us could ever predict.

It all starts when Joseph has a dream. The beginning of the Gospel of Matthew is filled with dreams that tell those who are dreaming them what God is doing in the world. The first few chapters of Matthew also have the following dreams:

- In Matthew 2:12, the magi are warned in a dream to disobey Herod in his search to find and kill the newborn Jesus.
- In Matthew 2:13, Joseph is warned in a dream of the wrath of Herod and is instructed to take Mary and the child and seek refuge in a safer place.
- In Matthew 2:19, Joseph is informed in a dream that Herod has died.
- Finally, in Matthew 2:22, Joseph is led to settle in Galilee, making Nazareth Jesus' home.

So it is safe to say that, in Matthew's Gospel at least, dreams are God's preferred method of divine communication and intervention.

But before the dream in today's passage is dreamed, there are a few more details to reckon with. The text tells us that Mary was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. What is curiously absent from today's narrative is any detail at all about the conversation that was had between Joseph and Mary. But I think it is safe to assume that that conversation was filled with frustration, anger, and confusion. Imagine for a moment that you are Joseph, and that you are engaged to be married to the woman of your dreams, who has just informed you that she is pregnant. You haven't slept with her yet so, logically, there is only one conclusion: she slept with another man. And yet, the woman that you trust so much as to marry her insists that no such thing happened. If you're Joseph, you're left with one of two difficult options: 1) break off the engagement quietly or 2) accept the inconceivable: that your fiancé has somehow managed to become pregnant without having sex.

Joseph, we are told, chose option one. A righteous option, we are told, by the moral codes of the day. And as he laid down to sleep that night, I can't help but wonder what Joseph was thinking about as he closed his eyes. Was he thinking about what would happen to Mary after he left her? How she would provide for herself and a child? Would the father of the child, whoever *that* was, take care of them? Was he thinking about how he would navigate the rest of his life without the woman that he had planned to spend the rest of it with? Would he ever find another woman to love as much as he loved Mary? Perhaps he was wondering if he was doing the right thing. Perhaps he was having second thoughts about abandoning Mary. After all, he had never found her to be distrustful before. Why should he begin to doubt her now?

I imagine that Joseph drifted off into an uneasy sleep that night. I wonder if he wondered what dreams may come.

Dreams come to us when we are at our most vulnerable. Dreams come to us when we are in the dark of night with nothing to guard us from letting the mysterious subconscious from taking us on a ride that we can't control. In the dark of night, God does wondrous things.

I never know when a dream begins or where it ends, kind of like you never are completely aware of that moment when you drift off into sleep. It's a space that is marked with mystery and truth. Because while what happens in a dream is not "reality," dreams, I'm convinced, tell us truths that are as real as the pulpit from which I stand.

And so, the truth comes to Joseph in the form of an angel.

"Do not be afraid" the angel tells Joseph, repeating a refrain we've come to expect from angels in the Bible. "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife for she did not cheat on you. Yes, she is pregnant, but the child is of not of man but of the Holy Spirit. She will have a son and you will call him Jesus, because he is to save all of creation."

Now, it is very important to note that the angel told Joseph to name the child. Because according to the law of that day, if a man named a child it legally became his and was officially a part of his lineage. This, of course, is why Matthew goes to such lengths to link Joseph to the line of David. By naming him, Joseph both makes Jesus his legal child and seals him into the line of David, to fulfill the line from Isaiah that says that a shoot shall spring forth from the stump of Jesse (Kind David's father).

And then, Joseph's dream comes to an end. Just as we might be curious as to what he was thinking as he drifted off to sleep, we too might be curious as to what he was thinking as he awoke from his slumber. Was he wondering when he crossed from the dream world into the "real" one? Was he wondering just how crazy it was to think about his beloved Mary being pregnant by the Holy Spirit? Was he considering dismissing the whole thing as a meaningless dream that was nothing more than his subconscious trying to make sense of a truly bizarre set of circumstances?

At the end of the day, we just don't know what was going through Joseph's mind after this divine dream. The text just tells us that Joseph woke up with a very different plan than the one he went to sleep with. Joseph awoke and did as the angel of the Lord told him to do. He took Mary as his wife. He didn't sleep with her until the child was born. And then he named the child Jesus.

Love and courage are two sides of the same coin; you cannot have one without the other. It took courage for Mary to sing her song. It took courage for Joseph to heed the instructions of the angel and adopt Jesus as his own son. It took courage because courage often compels us to choose between what is easy and what is right. Today's text lifts up Joseph as a model of courage; one that exemplifies for us what it looks like to follow God when it seems like the most absurd thing to do.

Brené Brown has said the following about courage: *"The root of the word courage is cor—the Latin word for heart. In one of its earliest forms, the word courage had a very different definition than it does today. Courage originally meant 'To speak one's mind by telling all one's heart.' Over time, this definition has changed, and today, courage is more synonymous with being heroic. Heroics is important and we certainly need heroes, but I think we've lost touch with the idea that speaking honestly and openly about who we are, about what we're feeling, and about our experiences (good and bad) is the definition of courage. Heroics is often about putting our life on the line. Ordinary courage is about putting our vulnerability on the line. In today's world, that's pretty extraordinary."*

In today's story, Joseph exercised courageous vulnerability. Obviously, the "safer" option would have been for him to just leave. Joseph could have simply washed his hands of this entire situation and left and started a new life without the drama and uncertainty of an immaculate conception.

Instead, Joseph chose the harder option. He chose the more vulnerable option. He chose the more courageous option. Joseph chose to stay. Joseph chose to bind himself to Mary in wedlock and to stand by her side through the uncertain territory ahead.

What might we have to learn from Joseph's courage? From Mary's?

Because today we must proclaim that courage can't wait. So much of the systemic causes of our the world's grief and suffering come from one thing: a lack of courage.

So I invite you, for thirty seconds to pause in silence and to think about someone in your life who had taught you what it means to have courage...

Let us together channel that courage. As anticipate the birth of Jesus Christ - the greatest example of courage we will ever have - let us remember the courage it took for Mary to be vulnerable enough to carry God's child. Let us remember the courage it took for Joseph to be vulnerable enough to stay with her through the chaos. And let us remember the courage it took for God to be vulnerable enough come to us in human flesh, to save us from our sins.

Friends, courage can't wait.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God's children, say: **Amen.**