

Matthew 1:18-25

- This week we turn the spotlight away from Mary and give 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 third Sunday of Advent is not Mary, or Elizabeth, or John the fiery Baptizer.
- It 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,
- 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 to Mary's child.
- If Joseph refuses, the fulfillment of prophecy comes to a halt.
- No pressure right?
- 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 not a guy who likes to make waves,
- or call attention to himself, or venture too close to controversy.
- Like most of us, he wants an orderly life.
- 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.
- Is that too much to ask?
- 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.
- 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 ridiculous claim that the baby’s dad is somehow God.
- Matthew, of course, doesn’t go into much detail about Joseph’s anguish.
- When Joseph sees Mary’s swollen belly, he throws himself on the ground, strikes his own face, and cries bitterly.
- He wonders long and hard how to respond, and asks Mary why she has betrayed both him and God so cruelly.
- Though this text isn’t in our canon, it’s not hard to imagine a similar scene playing out between Joseph and Mary in real life.
- The fact is, Joseph didn’t believe Mary’s story until Gabriel told him to.
- Why would he? Why would anyone?
- We make a grave mistake, I think, when we lessen 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, run of the mill, 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 become the talk of the town – and *not* in a good way.
- 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, 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.
- So much for living a well-ordered life.
- Then again, Joseph's story gives me hope.
- Once again...I can't relate to a person who leaps headlong into a fervent yes!
- I *can* relate, however, to a person who struggles and is hesitant in a decision like this one.
- Remember our first week of advent,
- Our reading from Matthew gave us a genealogy of Jesus's ancestors.

- He mentions Abraham – the patriarch who abandoned his son, Ishmael, and twice endangered his wife’s safety in order to save his own skin.
- He mentions Jacob, the trickster 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.
- These are just a few representative samples.
- Notice anything? Anything like messiness? Complication?
- How interesting that God, who could have chosen any genealogy for his Son,
- chose a long line of brokenness, imperfection, dishonor, and scandal.
- The perfect backdrop, I suppose, for his 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.
- Who brings salvation into the world through a young woman whose story was not believed?
- Through a well-meaning man who had to let go of righteousness in order to follow God?
- Through a cultural system obsessed with male honor and female purity?
- Through a helpless, tiny baby?
- 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 our life looks alarmingly different than you thought it would.

- Do not be afraid when God upends our assumptions about righteousness.
- Do not be afraid when God asks us to stand alongside the scandalous, the defiled, the suspected, and the shamed.
- Do not be afraid when God asks us to love something or someone more than our own reputation.
- Do not be afraid of the precarious, the fragile, the vulnerable, the impossible.
- Do not be afraid of the mess. The mess is the place where God is born.