

December 21, 2025
Fourth Sunday of Advent A
Trinity, St. Louis
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Isaiah 7:10-16

Psalms 80:1-7, 16-18

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-25

In the Name of God, whose coming we await. Amen.

If someone were to ask you to write a description of Jesus' birth, you would be hard pressed to be any more direct and to-the-point than Matthew, who begins, *Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way.*

In his short account of eight verses, Matthew is primarily concerned with the complicated and undoubtedly awkward situation leading up to the birth itself – which gets less than a sentence. If you sneeze (or snooze), you might miss it.

And yet, there is something fitting about Matthew's spare depiction. Because, truth be told, most people did miss it. The local news team didn't follow Mary's pregnancy. There were no crowds of paparazzi clamoring to get the first photograph of Mary's "Baby Bump." From what we can tell from Matthew's story, just about no one noticed.

After all, it was just a birth, like billions of others, unremarkable in every possible way. Which was, once again, the point. Jesus the Messiah, God-With-Us, came as One-Of-Us.

One of Matthew's aims in writing to his Jewish Christian audience was to demonstrate the continuity of God's actions – that Jesus was the fulfillment of prophecies and promises made to Israel long ago. In this case, he has an angel quote Isaiah 7: *the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel [KJV].*

Decades before Matthew's gospel took shape, Paul was making the same point: the continuity of *the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh* (Romans 1).

Matthew's very lean account differs enormously from Luke's, which overflows with poetry. Matthew deals with the logistics of a scandal. In just the second sentence, we find out that Mary is, mysteriously, pregnant – before the wedding. Oops.

Imagine, for a moment, the great distress that fell upon Joseph and Mary and their families. We're accustomed to thinking about the beauty and wonder of the birth of Jesus, and that's not a bad thing. But let's not forget the upset, the sense of betrayal, the disappointment, and a host of other emotions that Joseph must have experienced.

And then, there's the fear and hurt that Mary would likely have felt as they tried to sort out their divinely complicated relationship. Many of us have experiences of grown children or aging parents moving in with us. But God moving into the apartment over the garage? Yikes!

In highlighting the stress points, Matthew shows us that Joseph and Mary are not plaster saints. They are people *like us* – with ups and downs in their relationship, to put it mildly! From our vantage point, we know that it is those very ups and downs that God uses to work out God's purposes.

And then, Joseph has a dream. A dream that changes everything. Let's think about dreams for a moment, shall we? First, a story.

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It was a few days before Christmas. A woman woke up one morning and told her husband, "I just dreamed that you gave me a pearl necklace for Christmas. What do you think this dream means?" "Oh," her husband replied, "you'll know the day after tomorrow."

The next morning, she turned to her husband again and said the same thing, "I just dreamed that you gave me a pearl necklace for Christmas. What do you think this dream means?" And her husband said, "You'll know tomorrow."

On the third morning, the woman woke up and smiled at her husband, "I just dreamed again that you gave me a pearl necklace for Christmas. What do you think this dream means?" And he smiled back, "You'll know tonight."

That evening, the man came home with a small package and presented it to his wife. She was delighted. She opened it gently. And when she did, she found ... a book! A book called "The Meaning of Dreams."

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What do you dream about? When I can remember them, it seems that I dream in two major categories. Sometimes, my dreams are dreadful. I imagine painful relationships. I live in terror of deadlines and exams that I have missed. Sometimes I am standing in a pulpit, with nothing to say. These are nights that I spend wrestling like my ancestor, the patriarch Jacob.

But on other occasions, my dreams are wonderful, even refreshing. I have dreamed about reconciliation, with former enemies now at my table. I have dreamed of new life and hope. I have dreamed of lean years followed by prosperous years. These are nights that I dream like my ancestor, the patriarch Joseph.

Today, we hear about the first of four dreams of another Joseph of Dreams. In this dream Joseph is visited by an unnamed angel from God. The story of Gabriel appearing to Mary appears only in Luke's gospel.¹

Joseph dreamed of something wonderful, something astounding. God would enter the world. As crazy as it seemed, God would be born to his wife. Joseph had some serious work to do on trust issues. He had to figure out a way to trust God, and to trust Mary. That's some heavy lifting.

In the middle of some awkward days, Joseph had a dream. Joseph's dream was not about starting a Purity Program in Nazareth; Joseph's dream was not about spinning the scandal of Mary's pregnancy.

But, let's be real, life seemed to have gone off the rails. How could Joseph even think about walking forward into a world that didn't make sense? The rules and customs which had guided their lives seemed to have been tossed out. Eek!

In the middle of the night, when the world lay sleeping, Joseph had a dream. I imagine Joseph had a dream in the deep of the night so that he had to pay attention. There were no distractions, no excuses not to hear clearly.

In the middle of the night, Joseph dreamed that, in spite of the world standing on its head, we had been given the gift of Emmanuel, the abiding gift of God-With-Us.

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Do you think it would be arrogant to suppose that you could ever dream like Joseph – God calling you to prepare yourself as a place for God's revelation in the world? Is that something you could dare to hope for? This morning, I want to tell you that you should dare, because God's call to each of us is exactly as special and exactly as ordinary as that.

God calls each of us to be Christ-Bearers to the world. "Oh, that's too hi-faultin'," you say. Or disturbing. OK, then imagine a smaller world. Think of how you are called, daily, to be the face, the voice, the hands of Christ, of God-With-Us for others.

¹ Matthew recounts Joseph's subsequent dreams as being warned to flee to Egypt (2:13); that it was safe to return to Israel (2:19); and to withdraw to Nazareth in Galilee for safety (2:22).

If that's still too much of a stretch, think of those who bear Christ to and for you. Picture them: listening, supporting, challenging, present. There. Mostly, just there. With you.

Jesus came as one of us. Jesus was born as we are born, lived as we live, loved, laughed, and suffered as we do. God came, and God comes, through ordinary, mixed-up people like Joseph and Mary, in order to save ordinary, mixed-up people like you and me.

God comes to us through a birth like countless others to promise us freedom from fear, and from the sin and death that are the fruits of that fear.

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In 1944, towards the end of the Second World War, W. H. Auden wrote a long poem called *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*, which encapsulated the mystery of the redeeming power of the Incarnation, of Jesus coming into our actual, ordinary, lives. This short portion is titled "Mary and Joseph."

Blessed Woman.
Excellent Man,
Redeem for the dull the
Average Way,
That common ungifted
Natures may
Believe that their normal
Vision can
Walk to perfection.²

In the middle of this night of winter, I invite you to dream about what God might have in mind for you, in all your splendid ordinariness. As we approach Christmas, hold tight in your heart that Emmanuel was announced to Joseph, an ordinary man, and the husband of an ordinary woman: two people who were ordinary in the ways that you and I are ordinary. Which, in the end, is Matthew's point. God's gift of Emmanuel, God-With-Us, is precisely for ordinary people, for everyone, forevermore.

O come, O come, Emmanuel. Amen.

² W.H. Auden (1907-1973), from *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*, 1944.