

Fourth Sunday in Advent – 2025

Isaiah 7:10-17

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-25

Do you suppose that Joseph, as he raised Jesus, called the young lad by His name? The answer to that question is “yes.” Have there been episodes in your life that you recall with some frequency? How many of y’all think regularly about the day that you got married, or the day that you gave birth to your first child, or the day that someone close to you died? Some days change our lives forever. The name “Jesus” is a form of “Y’shua” which means “YHWH saves” or “the Lord is salvation.” Joseph didn’t decide on his own what to name this child. Joseph’s life was forever changed when an angel of the Lord visited him. “You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). How often did Joseph hearken back to what the angel of the Lord said to him? When Joseph spoke Jesus’ name, did he also think to himself *Immanuel* – God with us?

Of all the underappreciated figures in the Bible, and there are many, Joseph is perhaps near the top. Joseph did what he was commanded. It’s not a particularly flowery statement but it ought to pack a wallop as you hear it. Let’s start with the low hanging fruit. His fiancé turned up pregnant. Joseph knows he’s not the cause of this pregnancy. If he was told we aren’t told, but in all likelihood at some point the reality of Mary’s condition met Joseph’s ear. Joseph was a “just” man. What do you hear when you hear that word “just”? Joseph was truthful, honest, he protected others, he was humble, mindful of God’s will and God’s grace. But a pregnant fiancé is quite the obstacle, especially in first century Judaism. He must’ve loved Mary and been more than a little heart-broken, no matter what she said about her pregnancy (if she said anything at all). Stoning was the punishment prescribed in the Torah for an adulterous woman. Joseph was going to divorce her quietly (Matthew 1:19).

The confirmation class memorized the explanation to the Eighth Commandment this week. “We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way.” That was Joseph as he tried to figure out the right thing to do regarding a pregnant fiancé. And then the angel of the Lord brought divine direction. “Do not fear to take Mary as your wife” (Matthew 1:20). The angel addressed Joseph’s condition directly – he was fearful. And then comes the most singular phrase ever. “For that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:20). Joseph did what he was commanded, I expect with great joy. “When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus” (Matthew 1:24-25).

There’s a Psalm verse that, at least for me, Amy Grant made famous. Amy Grant is a singer who charmed audiences with her warm mezzo-soprano voice. I can still hear her sing, “Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and light unto my path” (Psalm 119:105). It’s a lyrical line, deeply theological and easy to understand. God lights the way, the path which He calls me to walk. A lamp for my feet is what I need in this life. The chaos of this world, the untrustworthy character of my sinful nature, and the deceptive actions of the demonic – I need a light for my path. I

suspect that there was much that Joseph didn't know. I suspect that he didn't know *how* he was going to do some of the things that he was called upon to do but he knew *that* he was going to do them. On another occasion, Joseph was told: "Rise and take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt..." (Matthew 2:13). And the next thing we are told is that "he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed for Egypt" (Matthew 2:14). Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path. Later, the angel appeared to Joseph a third time and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel" (Matthew 2:20). What do you suppose Joseph did?

Joseph doesn't whine; he doesn't pepper the angel with questions or barter for resources – he did what he was commanded. Ladies, is it a blessing for you when your menfolk obey the Lord? Was Mary blessed, was the young Messiah blessed to have a man like Joseph, a just man, who acted upon the Word that he was given? Joseph was the father to James, the brother of our Lord, the first bishop of Jerusalem, the man who wrote the book of James that is in our bible. Do you think that James learned from his father? Here's something James wrote: "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like" (James 1:22-23 NIV). The son of Joseph wrote that.

Here's where you and I fail. We put God's Word through our own filter and then decide if we will actually act on it. Service to the church and the larger community – does it fit in my schedule? If it's not a priority for you then you are putting God's Word through your own filter to make Christianity fit your lifestyle and not the other way around. Financially, your first fruits, are you giving to Christ and His church or are you prioritizing your fear or perhaps making money your god? It does take trust to give of your first fruits. Not many of you can run a marathon, but you can walk around the block. There was a lady who gave two copper coins – all she had (Mark 12:41-44). That's a marathon. The idea that one cannot afford to give is a lie, a self-deception, and trust is what is at a deficit – Lord, have mercy! Believers who give zero are robbing themselves of joy and modeling something that is quite the opposite of Joseph – Lord, have mercy! Together, as a congregation, we can walk around the block.

Here's the bedrock of stewardship: "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). That is a direct reference to you and to me. We are rich in grace, rich in love, rich in forgiveness, rich in the fellowship which the Son of God gives us – He gives, we receive. What He has first given to us we return a portion to Him to enact our fidelity, our trust, and our appreciation. We love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). That is stewardship. Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and light unto my path (Psalm 119:105). That is stewardship. Christ is the Light of the world (John 8:12). The One who saves you is the Word made flesh.

The Infinite God located Himself in Mary's womb. He who rules all things is Himself ruled by an umbilical cord. Born in a barnyard and laid in a manger – though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor. A cross is His throne. There He became poor with my untrust, poor with my idolatries, poor with my selfish, fearful reflexes. Christ is our steward. He saves me from my sins. He saves you from your sins. He used His resources perfectly. His blood, His

righteousness, His life – He used them to save you. His life is our path – faith knows no other. Jesus' stewardship is put in your mouth – take, eat, this is my body, given for you. Take, drink, this is my blood, shed for you. That is advent. That is the coming of the Lord that we cherish. We look to His manger, we look to His Word, and we look for His return. Come, Lord Jesus, and make us your guests and give to us the fruit of your sacrifice. You have restored our humanity by Your death and resurrection. Make us faithful. Make us loving. Make us just and hopeful and generous and alive with Your virtue. O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, and feed us with the bread of life.