



Sunday December 18, 2022  
Matthew 1:18-25 (Fourth Sunday of Advent)

Ascension Lutheran Church  
Pastor Tony Acompanado

Last night we hosted my wife's family for our annual Christmas party. As we had hoped, it turned out to be an amazing night filled with lots of fun and laughter, gifts, and of course great food. However, the week leading up to the party was spent securing last minute gifts and party supplies, decorating, preparing food, finishing a remodeling project, and cleaning the house. Ahhhh...cleaning the house. It's a time-honored tradition in our family, and one that I'd guess most of you share too when *you* prepare for guests. And I don't know about you, but I have a particular routine I like to follow.

I began with the kitchen, then moved to the family room and then on to bedrooms and bathrooms. Between each room I switched loads of laundry. And once I finished with our first floor I made my way down to our lower level. There I fluffed couch pillows, cleaned up our guest room and then proceeded to clean up all the scattered toys. Nerf blasters, video games, hot wheels, and all kinds of other toys.

Then after some intentional procrastination I came face to face with the two large Thomas the train tracks. One is a collection of several plastic track sets and the other is made up entirely of wooden pieces. At this point all the other cleaning was done, and I could no longer avoid the inevitable. So, I began the disassembly process – which for all the work that our sons and I put into building them in the first place, they came down relatively quickly and easily.

I started with the wooden track first and then once I had tossed all the tracks, bridges, trains and other stuff into their appropriate bins I moved on to tackle the plastic track. This track was huge and made up of twists and turns, tunnels, junctions, and everything else you can imagine.

But just as I was nearing the end I started paying closer attention to the pieces I was disassembling. With each piece I began to remember all the fun and laughter we had building those tracks and playing together. And while my pace slowed a bit, I remained determined to finish my cleaning task. And then, just like that...it was finished. I wish I could tell you that I felt a sense of accomplishment, instead – what I felt was sadness and guilt.

As I sat there for a few moments, wishing that I hadn't been in such a hurry to clean up...I felt an overwhelming urge to pull everything back out that I had just put away, and rebuild it. And now it was really late, but all that seemed to matter was setting everything back up so our family and guests could laugh and play with them together. Needless to say, the tracks were a huge hit and resulted in something even far greater than the smiles and laughter I had hoped for. Lesson learned.

This is the perfect segue into today's Gospel story. See, every third year in our lectionary cycle the spotlight shifts away from Mary and gives us the perspective of her would-be husband – a quiet, unassuming descendant of the House of David. So, on this fourth Sunday of Advent our entry point into the Nativity story isn't Mary, or Elizabeth, or even John the Baptist. Instead, it's Joseph – a quiet carpenter whose relatively good life is turned upside down following a dream.

But if we're tempted to sideline Joseph as an insignificant character in the Christmas story, the Gospel of Matthew reminds us that in fact, Joseph's role in the arrival of Jesus is essential. It's his willingness to lean into the impossible, to embrace the scandalous, to abandon his notions of holiness in favor of God's messy plan of salvation, 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 and *his* legitimacy to Mary's child. If Joseph refuses, the fulfillment of the prophecy comes to a screeching halt.

The Gospel describes Joseph as a "righteous man," in other words he's a man devoted to God and concerned with obedient and ethical living. And although Matthew doesn't elaborate, I think we can safely assume that Mary's husband-to-be 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? ...Does any of this sound familiar?*

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 with absolute certainty 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. And so, Joseph will be tainted forever by the scandal of Mary's forbidden pregnancy, *and* by her ridiculous and seemingly blasphemous claim that the baby's dad is somehow God.



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Matthew doesn't go into a much detail about Joseph's suffering, but we might imagine that when Joseph sees Mary's pregnant belly he wonders long and hard how to respond and even asks Mary why she has betrayed both him and God so callously. The fact is, Joseph didn't believe Mary's story *until* the angel told him to. *Why would he? Why would anyone?*

We make a serious mistake, I think, when we try to sanitize Joseph's consent. And we minimize his humanity when we assume that his acceptance of God's plan came easily, and distance ourselves from his humiliation and doubt. In fact, what Joseph's pain shows us is that God's approval isn't always the comforting thing we'd like to believe it is. The God of the New Testament never promises wealth, health, comfort, and ease to his chosen ones – but the truth is it just feels far easier to grasp than the reality.

In choosing Joseph to be Jesus's earthly father, God led a righteous man with a spotless 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 that he hadn't 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 own.

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 and incomprehensible. So much for living a well-ordered life.

Then again, Joseph's story brings me hope. I can't relate to a person who leaps with both feet into obedience. I *can* relate, however, to a person who struggles, to a person whose "yes" is cautious, uncertain, and scared. I'm grateful that Joseph's choice was a hard one. I'm glad he struggled...because truthfully, I struggle too.

Interestingly, in the verses that immediately come before our Gospel reading, Matthew gives us a family history of Jesus's ancestors. He mentions Abraham – the patriarch who abandoned his son, Ishmael, and who not once but twice endangered his wife's safety in order to save himself. He mentions Jacob, the swindler who scammed and 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. He mentions Tamar, who pretended to be a sex worker, and Rahab, who was one. And these are just a few examples.

Do you notice anything? Anything like messiness? Complication? Scandal? Sin? I find it interesting that God, who could have chosen any genealogy for his Son, chose a long line of brokenness, imperfection, dishonor, and scandal. Then again, I suppose this is the perfect setting for his beautiful works of restoration, healing, hope, and second chances.

There's so much to ponder in the Christmas story – so much to consider about the surprising ways of God. It's no wonder the angel's first words to Joseph were, "*Do not be afraid.*" If we truly want to enter into the reality of 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 your life looks alarmingly different than you thought it would. Do not be afraid when God overturns your cherished assumptions about morality, justice, fairness, equity, or worthiness. 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 risky, the vulnerable, or the impossible. Do not be afraid even when the mess looks like addiction, disease, depression, job loss, uncertainty, death, or the end of a relationship.

My friends, take it from me and my train track lesson. Do not be afraid of the mess. Don't be in such a rush to get it all cleaned up. Allow yourself to dwell there and see what God is up to. Because the mess is precisely the place where God enters the world to remind us just how priceless and loved we are and bring us more fully into the promise of indescribable joy. Thanks be to God. Amen.