

**Sunday, December 21, 2025**  
**Fourth Sunday of Advent (Year A)**  
Matthew 1.18-25  
*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

**“Joseph’s Annunciation”**

In two out of the three years of our three-year lectionary cycle, the Gospel for the Fourth Sunday of Advent focuses on the Virgin Mary. In Year C (last year), we hear the Annunciation: the account of the Archangel Gabriel coming to Mary to announce that she will give birth to the Son of God. In Year B (next year), we hear the Visitation: the event following the Annunciation, in which Mary goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth who is pregnant with John the Baptist. Both of these stories are recorded in the Gospel according to Luke. And in both of these stories, Mary is the central figure. Which makes sense. As we move through Advent, as we move closer and closer to Christmas and the birth of Jesus, attention naturally shifts to the impending birth. And Mary does kinda have an important role to play in that whole process.

But here, in Year A of our lectionary, we hear a different take on the run-up to Jesus’ birth. A version of the story in which Mary is referenced, and yet does not make an actual appearance. Interesting, since the Gospel we heard today is Matthew’s version of the birth narrative, opening with, “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way . . .” Matthew does rightly reference Mary and the fact that “she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.” All the key points of Jesus’ lineage: Son of God, born of a woman; therefore both divine and human. Beyond that, Matthew chooses to focus not on Mary, the one who would give birth to Jesus, but rather on the man Mary is engaged to—on Joseph. Someone who has no biological involvement in the matter whatsoever. And yet, Matthew feels it is important to make Joseph’s story the opening of his entire Gospel. A story that is, in effect, Joseph’s version of both the Annunciation and the birth of Jesus, all wrapped into one. But why? Other than being betrothed to the woman who would become the Mother of God, Joseph has no connection nor obligation to this child.

Although, from Matthew’s perspective, Joseph has a critical role to play, by virtue of his family history, by virtue of his genealogy. It is important to remember that Matthew was a Jew and was writing to a Jewish audience, building a case for how Jesus is not only the new Moses who will lead the people to liberation and a new life, but also that he is the long-awaited Messiah. One of the key attributes of the Messiah is that he will be of the line of David. As we hear in Isaiah Chapter 9, “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onwards and for evermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this” (Is 9.6-7). And as we heard in our Old Testament reading last Sunday, also from Isaiah, “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him” (Is 11.1-2). Reference to Jesse, the father of David, from whom the Messiah would descend.

There's just one small problem with the current situation, with the Messiah being the Son of God and born of a human mother. Since the understanding of family lineage is determined through the father's line, not the mother's, how do you determine the lineage of Jesus? The only way the child could be considered of the line of David would be if his father is a descendent of David. I suppose one could argue that by virtue of being the Son of God, Jesus is of the line of David, since David is ultimately descended from the first humans created by God. But for the ancients, that may have been a bit of a reach in more ways than one. So, in keeping with "we've always determined lineage this way," it is just much simpler to go with lineage of the de facto human father. Best not to ask too many questions.

Now, Joseph does fit the criteria. As we see in the genealogy of Jesus which is the actual opening of Matthew's Gospel, Joseph is indeed of the line of David. Matthew opens his Gospel with the words: "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David" (Mt 1.1). Tracing the genealogy from Abraham, through to David, to "Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah" (Mt 1.16). Never mind the fact that Jesus would not share blood with Joseph. He is considered "in" by sheer virtue of being the spouse of Jesus' biological mother. While this would not hold up under modern-day paternity tests, it was deemed valid by God in the choosing of Mary to be the mother of his Son. And to any human of the day, looking back, it all worked. All the boxes were checked.

In agreeing to buy into this proposition, Joseph is taking a huge risk. In agreeing to allow his name to be used for purposes of establishing genealogy he was risking his name in other ways. As we are told, "When . . . Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit . . . Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly." Upon finding out Mary was pregnant, Joseph's initial reaction was to call off the marriage. Because of the type of man he was, and obviously in love with Mary, it pained him to do so. And yet, as we say today, it was about the optics. The immediate presumption on the part of anyone they knew would have been that one of two things had occurred. Either Joseph had given into temptation and slept with Mary before they were actually married, violating social norms against premarital sex; or, that Mary had been unfaithful to Joseph. Either way, things would not go well for Mary. She would be subject to ridicule and shame. And technically, under Jewish law, execution for her apparent indiscretion would be warranted. Hence, Joseph's initial resolve to dismiss her quietly. It was a no-win situation. No one would believe that the child was actually conceived by God. Who ever heard of anything like that?

Enter the angel of the Lord, appearing to Joseph in a dream: "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." There is whole lot wrapped up in the one statement. There's a whole lot wrapped up in one phrase: "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife."

Because Joseph would have undoubtedly had a lot of fears. Not just for the well-being of the woman he loves, for the shame and disgrace she would have to endure. But also for himself. Not only would her reputation be ruined, but so would his. A man whose fiancée became pregnant would be suspect if he did not dismiss her. It would either imply that the child was his,

in which case, it said something about his moral weakness. And if Mary had actually been unfaithful and he was willing to forgive her and raise her child as his own could be viewed of a sign of another form of weakness on his part. Either way, it would not look good on him, resulting in potential shunning by his peers, being looked down upon by those he encountered.

The angel seeks to assure Joseph that following his true nature—obviously being deeply compassionate—would be the best thing, and that God would take care of the rest. Joseph, also being a man of profound faith, “did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.”

There is another reason for Joseph to have been afraid of taking on the role as earthly father to the Son of God. You have to admit, raising the Son of God would have been a daunting prospect. Perhaps Joseph was initially afraid of getting in the way of God’s work. Of potentially messing up God’s plans. What if he did something wrong in trying to raise Jesus? The whole enterprise could fall apart because of what he did, intentionally or unintentionally.

The implication of the angel’s message to not be afraid is that Joseph has a role to play. The critical role of being husband and protector of Mary, to be sure. But also to be the de facto father to the Messiah. To be the one who would be responsible for raising him. God has entrusted to Joseph a key role in raising the baby Jesus into adulthood. To welcome this child into his family lineage, the line of David. To protect the one who would become Messiah so that he could grow into his assigned role. To care and provide for his needs until he is able to care for himself. To teach and model faithful devotion and worship of God. To instill the social values of the day. To teach his trade as a craftsman so that Jesus would have a way of supporting himself when he went out into the world. In short, Joseph was to be responsible for shaping and guiding the person Jesus would become.

We may not know exactly what Joseph said or did in the raising of Jesus. But we have a pretty good idea just by looking at the man Jesus became. His was a ministry filled with love and mercy, with compassion, with care for others. All characteristics that Joseph exhibited in today’s Gospel. Characteristics that were undoubtedly so deeply ingrained in who he was as a person of faith. Characteristics that would have inevitably been passed on to Jesus. Love and compassion being the most obvious: love of God and love for Mary. But also courage. Courage to be willing to put potential social criticism and even ostracism aside to do what God asked of him. Modeling the courage that Jesus would need throughout his public ministry and to the very end with his Passion.

What we hear in today’s Gospel reading is the most extensive narrative about Joseph in all the Gospels. Later in Matthew’s Gospel we do hear how Joseph, informed by an angel in a dream, took Mary and the newborn Jesus to Egypt to escape the slaughter of the innocents under Herod. We then hear how Joseph brought his family back to Israel upon Herod’s death. We have a few passing references to Joseph in other Gospels. But at some point, by the time Jesus begins his public ministry, Joseph disappears from the pages of Scripture. And yet, what he provides, as indicated in a mere handful of references, is significant and enduring: informing and influencing who Jesus would become.

Joseph's significance extends beyond the influence on how Jesus was raised and on who he became. In what he did, starting with the announcement from an angel and how he responded, particularly in his actions, Joseph modeled what it means to fully embrace God's mystery as revealed in his Son. He not only modeled what it means to be in right relationship with God and with others. He not only served as a model for Jesus as he grew into the fullness of who God created him to be. Joseph also serves as a model for us of what it means to be those entrusted with the life of a baby who would grow to become our Messiah and Savior. To be those to carry on the legacy that Joseph began when he assented to God's plan.