



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Reverend Meredith E. Ward, *Associate Rector for Pastoral Care*

## An Unexpected Path

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 18, 2022*

*The Fourth Sunday of Advent*

*Based on Isaiah 7:10-16; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25*

*In the name God, who was, and is, and is to come.*

*Amen.*

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, with Christmas just a week away, we hear, as we do every year, the story of the announcement of Christ's birth: the Annunciation. When it comes to annunciation stories, we are probably most familiar with the Annunciation to Mary recounted in Luke, when the angel Gabriel came to tell her she would bear a son. Less familiar, perhaps, is the story we hear this morning from Matthew's Gospel, the annunciation to Joseph, a message that is given to him in a dream.

There are good reasons why the annunciation to Mary is so much more well-known and more celebrated than the annunciation to Joseph. Luke's version of the story is filled with drama and suspense. There's a whole conversation between Mary and the angel that for centuries has provided a rich source of reflection for theologians, biblical scholars, preachers, artists, poets, and ordinary people alike. And then, of course, there is Mary's expression of pure joy as she runs to tell the news to her cousin Elizabeth, and sings her praises to God in a song that has come to be known as the Magnificat. Since the earliest days of the church, visual artists have found great inspiration in Mary's story, portraying the unfolding drama in a seemingly infinite number of ways, with Mary in various states of emotional excitement. Whether it's fear or curiosity or wonderment or joy, Mary is alive and engaged and responsive to the angel's presence. And she responds to the news with the words: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Perhaps understandably, the Annunciation to Joseph has been a less popular subject for theological reflection or for artistic representation. Throughout the history of art, Mary, the Wise Men, and even the shepherds have gotten more play than Joseph. Maybe that's because when Joseph receives the news about Christ's birth ... he's ... well ... he's asleep. From an artistic point of view, there's not a lot you can do with a dozing Joseph. There's no interaction with the angel, no conversation, no rushing off to share the news, no song of joy. In fact, Joseph never says anything at all.

There's another, rather awkward, issue around Joseph, too, and that's his paternity. If Mary is with child through the power of the Holy Spirit, where does that leave Joseph? Angry? Embarrassed? Relegated to the margins? He seems to be at best a supporting character in the drama of God's salvific plan.

Pretty much everything about Joseph's story goes against the grain. In Advent, we hear the call of Jesus to "Keep awake ... for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming" (Matthew 24:42), yet Joseph hears the voice of God in his sleep. We're urged to share the Good News of Christ's birth, but Joseph never says a word. And despite having what *should* be a prominent role of protecting and raising this child, Joseph soon moves off to the sidelines, and eventually he's out of the picture entirely.

Nevertheless, whatever impressions we may have of Joseph, Matthew wants us to pay attention to him. And so in his Gospel, Matthew makes Joseph the central figure in the announcement of Jesus' birth, which he tells in just eight short verses. Matthew introduces the story in a very matter-of-fact way: "Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way." But there is nothing ordinary about this birth. On the contrary, it is very, very strange, and it has all the earmarks of a scandal.

It seems that in the time between their betrothal—when they had been promised to each other in marriage—and when they were actually married, Joseph learns that Mary is pregnant. And he knows that the child is not his. This is a problem. For both of them. And so Joseph is faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, if he stays with her, he will have to raise a child that is not his own, and he will put his own reputation at risk. On the other hand, if he publicly breaks off the engagement, he will condemn Mary to a life of public humiliation.

Joseph is clearly worried about being associated with Mary, and he determines to leave her. But because he is a righteous man—that is to say, someone who lives not only by the letter, but the spirit of the law—he resolves to spare Mary public humiliation by separating from her privately. But then, an angel comes to him in a dream and tells him not to be afraid to marry Mary, that this child is conceived by the Holy Spirit. Mary will bear a son and you, Joseph, will name him Jesus, which means "God saves." In an instant, Joseph's understanding of righteousness and mercy expands and is transformed.

Joseph, like his eponymous forebear with the colorful coat, is a dreamer. God speaks to him in dreams, and when we meet him in Matthew's Gospel, he seems to already understand this. God will speak to Joseph in dreams several times again after the child is born, directing his movements from Israel to Egypt and back again, to keep his wife and baby safe. Throughout it all, Joseph never says a word. Humbly, obediently, and with an open heart, he learns from these dreams and follows the will of God.

Because he knows, deep within his soul, that through his adoption of this child, this birth will be the fulfillment of 42 generations of ancestors, descended from Abraham through the royal line of David, as foretold by the prophets. Matthew gives us that royal genealogy right at the beginning of his Gospel—verses that immediately precede today's reading—and the angel addresses Joseph as Son of David. But there is another, alternate strand woven into this genealogy that Joseph must have known, too, a genealogy that includes, unusually, the names of four women, women who figured out creative ways to navigate their precarious situations, while staying true to the social and religious norms of their day. Joseph, son of David, yes. But also Joseph, son of Tamar, son of Rahab, son of Ruth, son of Bathsheba. These women were also part of Joseph's heritage: all of them unlikely and unexpected agents of God's action, from whom Joseph inherited a willingness to choose the unexpected path.

Joseph listened to a word that the rest of the world had not yet heard. He followed a light that the rest of the world could not yet see. He kept his counsel and followed that light, leading his family to safety in their moments of greatest peril. The sleeping Joseph received the Word of God in a dream, awoke to a new reality, and yet shared it with no one. We may wonder what price he paid for his silent faithfulness, as he and Mary prepared for the birth of their son.

In her poem "Christmas and Common Birth,"<sup>vi</sup> Anne Ridley writes:

It is good that Christmas comes at the dark dream of the year  
That might wish to sleep ever.  
For birth is awaking, birth is effort and pain;  
And now at midwinter are the hints, inklings  
(Sodden primrose, honeysuckle greening)  
That sleep must be broken.  
To bear new life or learn to live is an exacting joy:

The whole self must waken; you cannot predict the way  
It will happen, or master the responses beforehand.  
For any birth makes an inconvenient demand;

Joseph, that righteous man, awakened from a dream with an inconvenient demand, of learning to live with an exacting joy of a coming birth—a birth foretold, but as yet unseen—to follow an unexpected path toward the promise made to God’s people long, long ago.

What inconvenient demands are being made of you today? What strongly-held principles might you need to reconsider? What birth as yet unseen are you being called to steward forth? What unexpected path are you being called to follow? As we prepare to welcome the Christ child into our midst, let us give thanks for silent, sleeping Joseph, this humble man of profound faith, who through the intervention of a dream, became willing to change his mind and open his heart. This unexpected, long-expected child will be born into a messy, scandalous, unpredictable, and unprepared world. Joseph, the dreamer, will keep him safe. He will save the One who came to save us all.

Amen.

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For information about St. Bart’s and its life of faith and mission  
write us at [central@stbarts.org](mailto:central@stbarts.org), call 212-378-0222, or visit [stbarts.org](http://stbarts.org)  
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022

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<sup>i</sup> Guite, Malcolm. *Waiting on the Word—a Poem a Day for Advent, Christmas and Epiphany*. Canterbury Press Norwich, 2015.