

What Do You Fear? Love
Matthew 1:18-25
Sunday, December 21, 2025 | Advent Week 4

Joseph was afraid. In fact, he was terrified. But it wasn't the kind of fear you might expect. You might figure it was the angel. I mean, that doesn't happen every day, even in dreams. And this wasn't just any old dream. The angel *really was* a messenger from the all-knowing, almighty God. That would be enough to make anyone scared, right?

But that wasn't what made Joseph afraid. What terrified Joseph was what the angel said. Specifically, the angel confirmed what Joseph had just been told. His bride-to-be, Mary, was pregnant.

Now, this was bad news for all kinds of reasons.

Now, for Mary, this was *horrible* news. At the very least, Joseph would have to divorce her. Their betrothal constituted a legal contract for marriage. In a sense, they were already married, the marriage just wouldn't be consummated until after the official ceremony. If Mary had been unfaithful, the law *required* Joseph to end the contract—ie, divorce Mary.

And it just got worse from there. Her family might well disown her. The news of her illicit pregnancy would spread through her tiny village at the speed of light and she would be shunned. More than likely, she would have to move away to a place where she had no family, no village, no social safety net. And, in a culture like hers, where your identity was largely defined by your relationships with family and community, that was practically a death sentence. But even worse than that, under a strict interpretation of the law, she was subject to actual stoning and death.

The outlook was better for Joseph, but not by a lot. If he cared for Mary, which it appears he did, he would have been worried for her, for all the reasons I just said.

And then there's the fact that the woman he's engaged to marry—who had committed herself to whom he had committed himself—was going to have someone else's baby. That would be pretty hard to take.

The village would find out. Either they would think he had slept with her, or that she had spurned him and slept with someone else. In a culture that put honor above all else, this would be a disaster. He would be disgraced.

And finally, he might actually have been afraid of getting in trouble with the law. It's possible that he loved her enough to consider finalizing the marriage despite what she had done. But if he did that, he'd be breaking the law. His reputation for uprightness, righteousness, and observing the law would be destroyed.

So, yeah, Joseph was afraid.

Now, I've got to admit, not many of us are likely to find ourselves in exactly Joseph's situation, but that doesn't mean we don't still have plenty to be afraid of. This Advent I've been asking y'all to share some of the things that frighten you. Y'all have provided some really good responses. And from those responses, I'd say most of our fears revolve, as did Joseph's, around our families. Some of us are struggling in our marriages. Some of us are worried about our own health or the health of our kids or parents. Some of us with kids in the military are afraid of that unexpected visit from army officers knocking on the front door. Some of us are worried about our own physical and mental decline, not wanting to be a burden to our kids. I'm getting to the

age where I can start relating to that one. There's fear surrounding our current political situation, fear surrounding the current economic situation. People worried about their jobs and being able to provide for their families. Some of us are just wondering how we're going to pay the bills and buy groceries, much less buy Christmas presents. And all bets are off if there's a sudden accident or illness.

And as much as this is supposed to be a holly jolly time of the year, for a lot of us, this season just amplifies the worry and fear. We know we're supposed to be all about Jesus, but we can't help getting caught up on the shopping and the parties and the events and the obligations. It's supposed to be a time of peace, but we get anxious every time we look at the ever-dwindling free time on our calendars. We can't help being worried whether the family gathering this year is going to be another disaster ... or maybe about the fact that this year, there isn't going to be one.

So much fear, so much worry. How do we deal with it all?

Well, maybe Joseph's experience can help us figure that out. Because in the midst of the apparently cataclysmic bad news, the angel also had some good news; some *really* Good News, if Joseph would just believe it.

His wife Mary *was* pregnant. But it wasn't from being with some random dude. It was through God's very Spirit. The child would literally be God's Son, fully human and fully divine, a completely new thing in the world. God made flesh. On top of that, the child was to be named Jesus—which means "God saves." And the salvation he would offer wouldn't be the kind of

political or military ascendancy the Jews were expecting; he would save the people *from their sins*.

And, as Joseph would no doubt later learn, and as we learn later on in this book, the salvation Jesus came to bring wasn't *just* wiping the slate clean of our sins. It was also making available a completely different kind of life, an abundant and eternal life, beginning the moment we say yes to Jesus and continuing into eternity; a life made possible through God's very Spirit dwelling within us. As the apostle Paul says in 3:16 of his letter to the Romans, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that those who believe in him shall not perish, but have *eternal* life."

In the apparently tragic news of the birth of that little baby, the angel also brought Joseph incredibly Good News, the best news possible: salvation—new and eternal life—not just for Joseph and Mary, but for the whole world.

We are just a few days away from celebrating birth of that child. We are just a few days away from celebrating God's unbounded and eternal love for all of humanity, and for you. God—the uncreated creator of the universe, all-powerful, all-knowing, eternal—love us. God loves you. God loves you so much God sent God's son out of eternity and into the world, to live as an example of God's love in action, to die so we could be freed from all the things that keep us from that love, and to be resurrected so we might enjoy that love for all eternity.

And that kind of love—that kind of life—makes anything we might fear pale to insignificance in comparison.

So, how did Joseph respond to this Good News? Pretty simple. He obeyed.

Now, I want you to think about that for a second. Until Mary's child, every child born in the history of the human race had been born as the result of a union between a human man and a human woman. Nothing in Joseph's experience up until the visit of that angel would even *suggest* any other possibility. Joseph's fears regarding Mary's pregnancy were very real, very well-founded, very reasonable. The angel was asking him to ignore everything he knew about how the world worked. He was asking Joseph to throw out reason and go *way* out on a limb. Joseph would have been perfectly justified to say no.

But that isn't what Joseph did. He responded in faith, with love. He didn't do the "reasonable" thing. He didn't divorce Mary. He obeyed. They got married and ended up having many more children together, all while Joseph raised Jesus as his own. Joseph didn't let the fear win. Instead, he trusted that in Jesus, God really *was* bringing salvation.

And this Advent season, this day, in this book, God is asking us to do the same thing. To respond to God's love *with* love. Love and faithfulness and trust.

The fears that surround us and invade us may seem overpowering. But think about it. God is bigger. God is stronger. And God offers us a remedy; God offers us salvation; God offers us a new life.

When we entrust and dedicate ourselves to God, the fears may not immediately disappear. The process of accepting the New Life that Jesus offers is just that: a process. And as we embrace that process, as we keep on, moment by moment, day by day, renewing our trust and our dedication and our love for the God who has saved us, our fears begin to recede, and

be replaced by God's love. As we internalize more and more the all-encompassing nature of God's love for us, the fears begin to fade.

Right now, your fears may seem overwhelming. But know this: God has conquered them in the one whose birth we're celebrating this evening. God has conquered them in Jesus.