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*Fourth Sunday of Advent  
December 23, 2007*

*Matthew 1:18-25*

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### **Joseph's Dream**

Intro: Our New Testament reading is from the first chapter of Matthew. Matthew begins his Gospel with an extensive genealogy list that traces Joseph's ancestry to Abraham. Our reading follows right after this lineage has been established. It would be very important for Jewish listeners to hear this because "Who is your father?" was an essential question in establishing one's identity. This morning we read of Jesus' birth and how Joseph agrees to accept the child as his own. Let us listen for God's word in this story of Jesus' birth.

Two days of shopping left before Christmas. By now, the question "What do you want for Christmas?" has been asked and answered so many times it begins to seem like a test to see if you will answer the same way. (If anyone is wondering I am hoping for a model rocket set. I said it in July and I'm still saying it now.) Adam and Sarah have been working on their list for Santa- just a few things really (unroll scroll). When Monica and I cautioned the children that Santa couldn't get all that down the chimney in one trip, and reminded them that Jesus only received three presents, Sarah said "I know I won't get it all, I'm just going to ask and then see what

happens." (Another issue that Adam mentioned is that we don't have a chimney)

While we are not slow to ask Santa for things, some of us willing to shoot for the moon, we often hesitate to make requests of God or put God to the test. The Old Testament passage from Isaiah tells about King Ahaz not wanting to ask God for a sign. While at many points in scripture the word is don't put God to the test, here it seems God is saying "Go ahead, ask me for a sign" Ahaz is king of Judea and they are faced with being overrun by invading nations. God's mouth piece, the prophet Isaiah, instructs

King Ahaz that the only answer is to place absolute trust in God. He cautions Ahaz not to resist or to depend on the things of this world, but to do what is right for the people. "Ask for a sign, any sign" Isaiah challenges Ahaz.

Hoping to look pious, Ahaz ignores God's invitation to request the sign by which he could know that God's will had been fulfilled. "I will not ask for a sign" Ahaz responds. "I will not tempt my God!" What he is saying in other words is I will not trust. I'll do things my own way and in the way of the world and he does so. He fails to discern the signals from God and the world around him and the people are carried off.

In spite of Ahaz's pretense of piety, God declares the sign of salvation: "A young woman shall be with child" Here we get a glimpse of how God will do things in the world, down is up, poor is rich and weak is strong. It is trust and truth - not force and frenzy that will save us. Ahaz would not trust that a sign could be asked for and it would come. He wouldn't let God get that close, or that far into his life. Like Ahaz we so often go through life trying to look pious. We act as if our influence, our connections and our own power are enough to save us from the questions, doubts, difficulties, and desires that plague us. We miss the invitation to let God get closer.

In our New Testament lesson Joseph is faced with a choice. Next to nothing is known of Joseph. There are no words of his recorded in any gospel, and yet he has a central role in the story of Jesus' birth. As Matthew tells it, the whole miracle of Christmas momentarily rests on Joseph's shoulders awaiting his freely chosen decision to either accept or reject the stunning news of an impending Messiah. Imagine that scene for a moment, what it would be like to be Joseph as Mary comes to say, "I'm pregnant, and I have not been unfaithful." You've got to believe me. Who would? Who could? Joseph knows the child is not his. What is he to do? Joseph grappled with the unexpected and upsetting intrusion of the Holy Spirit into his nicely planned life.

Mary's condition must mean that she has broken the commitment of their contract, denied the bounds of the betrothal. Scripture says he was a righteous man and in order to demonstrate his love of God, and do what the law required, that was above all else for him. He had to end the relationship with Mary, at least so he thought. He wrestled with the decision and thought he was acting in good faith, as he made up his mind to dismiss Mary quietly and not expose her to public ridicule or even physical harm. He would do as the law required, but in a way that would protect Mary as best he could, even if it meant he would bear

some of the shame.

That is what he made up his mind to do, follow the law. Then in a dream an angel, or messenger from God, come to say Joseph do not be afraid. Which I learned in seminary is actually angel code talk for "Look out something really big is going to happen to you". "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife."

For just a moment God's plan seems to rest in the hands of this simple man, Joseph. He knows the law and wants to be faithful above all else. No matter how much he loved Mary his love of God meant obedience to the law. Now he is called on to take a real risk. Stay with Mary, claim the child, give them both your name.

Matthew traces Jesus' lineage back through Joseph side of the family, establishing Jesus as the "son of David" and the "son of Abraham" by virtue of being, legally Joseph's son. If Joseph had carried through with his plans to dismiss Mary, not only would Jesus have been illegitimate in the eyes of his culture, he would have been without the validity of being from David's line.

Part of what Matthew claims about Jesus through the long genealogy is that Jesus comes from Abraham, so he is a true Jew, he is of David, so he is a legitimate King, and he is the savior we have been

waiting for. All this is possible through being adopted by Joseph. Part of the miraculous conception, is the incorporation of Jesus into Joseph's family tree. Family takes on a whole new definition when Joseph says yes. Transforming grace enters when people of any circumstance say "Yes, we are a family, love is welcome here."

There are so many risks for Joseph, he had to wonder what if he was wrong, and his dream was only wishful thinking? We all want certainty, sure signs, grace with guarantees. He gets a dream. Joseph's situation is our situation, there are so many things in our lives that we are unsure of, things we wish could be different yet don't know how to change, there are things that seem like only dreams, and we can't know for sure, but God calls to us and says "trust, fear not." Look for signs, even ask for them and trust them.

Joseph has to face the risk of being wrong, the risk of damage to his own reputation, his closest relationships. He could lose his friends, possessions or more, by listening and responding to the angel's words. He must risk that all his faith could be in vain.

The only way Joseph can know more is to accept the lead of the angel-vision and follow through. He could have most certainly said no, and stopped there, but

he did not. The truth of some things in life we can only know by giving ourselves to them - in order to find the truth in them. Joseph did that.

Joseph opened his heart and spirit, his home and his whole future to the intrusion of the divine. Something more than the law was happening; he chose to be part of it. His faith in God made him willing to take risks. Faith that does not risk, that will not hope for change, that can not put love before the law, is of no use. In this turbulent time for our country, during this season, let us be people of faith. Knowing that our faith, our desire to do the right things is only the beginning. Even Joseph and Mary could not have made this miracle by themselves. They said yes, but that only opened the door for God's divine intervention. It will always remain a wonderful mystery as to just how God comes into the world in human flesh to bring joy, peace, hope, and love. These are things that will always be signs and gifts of heaven. We need to say yes for them to have meaning and influence in our lives. May we do today and in the days ahead.

AMEN.