

Sermon by Rev. Anthony Weisman – December 14, 2025
Matthew 1:18-25
To Be One of the Hidden Righteous Ones

He's there, bowing over the manger in every nativity set on every mantel, marveling at the sleeping baby alongside Mary and the shepherds. But, unless his head happens to be crowned with a halo, you'll actually probably not be able to tell him apart from the shepherds. He's a bearded man among bearded men, any one of which could be swapped out for any other.

The little boy playing him in the Christmas pageant might have a line or two, but that's about it. The inner drama of coming to terms with the illegitimacy of the child he is to raise as his own is not really something we want a kid exploring as a method actor, or want any kids asking questions about. So that part of the story is set aside. His story is set aside.

I can't think of a single common carol in which he, in which Joseph, is even mentioned. Which is too bad, because he is an interesting character. He is a compelling character. While the Gospel of Luke tells the Christmas story from Mary's perspective, the Gospel of Matthew tells it from Joseph's. As you heard in the morning scripture lesson, here, Joseph's experience comes to the fore.

Of the woman he is to marry, it is said that "she was found to be pregnant." That's a very particular way of putting it. Notice the use of the passive voice there: she *was found to be* pregnant. Who found this out? And how was this found out? There's no sense of who knows what or who is saying what. There is a cloud of scandal, a cloud of scandal which casts its shadow, in part, over Joseph. Joseph is described as a "righteous" man; and so, his actions, his response to what he believes to be Mary's betrayal, show us what righteousness looks like – like *mercy*. (If you wonder where Jesus learned *mercy* from, it's him.)

In that time, a man was entitled and expected to take legal or extralegal action against an adulteress. But, in what would have been an agonizing and heroic offering of grace, Joseph chooses to move on quietly, chooses to let Mary salvage whatever of her reputation and of her life she can. But still, he moves on.

He intends to, anyway, until an angel visits him in a dream. The angel says what angels always say, which is, evidently, what God knows all of us always need to hear: The angel says, "Do not be afraid." The angel says he should he should not afraid to take Mary as his wife, and explains that the child she will bear was conceived by the Holy Spirit. (I'm sure *that* really cleared things up.) The angel tells Joseph that he is to name the child and to raise the child as if he were his own son. And Joseph obeys.

Long ago, the 13th-century German mystic Meister Eckhart wondered, "What good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for Mary to give birth to her son if I do not also give birth to him in my person and in my time and in my culture?" "We are all meant to be mothers of God," he concluded. "We are all meant to be mothers of God, for God is always needing to be born."

Each of us, Eckhart said, are to open ourselves to God as Mary opened herself to God. Each of us are to let God grow within us, to let God change us, body and soul, to let God swell our hearts and our lives. Each of us are to feed God of our own selves, until some new incarnation of God – until some good deed or good purpose, some act of kindness or compassion, some bold commitment, some brave hope, some creation of beauty, until some new miracle of love and joy is born into the world.

Each of us are to be bearers of God's presence and love and power. That is so true. We are all meant to be mothers of God. And – *and* – and I'm thinking of this morning's scripture lesson, thinking of Joseph, *and*: I think we are all, also, supposed to be *stepfathers of God*. Without generalizing – because many of us have stepfathers who *are* fathers in the truest sense of the word, who are the fathers we never had, who are the fathers we always wanted; there are as many different ways of being a stepfather as there are stepfathers – but taking only Joseph and his experience as a point of departure: What might it mean to be a *stepfather* of God?

For him, for Joseph, it meant being a part of what God was doing in someone else's life. It meant participating in another person's miracle. It meant watching, bearing witness, as someone he loved became a living, breathing miracle. And it meant guarding that miracle.

A line from Rilke, from his *Letters to a Young Poet*, comes to mind: he wrote that love consists in “two solitudes, bordering and protecting and greeting one another.” That's what happens here, with Joseph. There is a bordering and a protecting and a greeting of Mary's miracle. There is the spaciousness that is love: coming close, coming alongside her, walking alongside her as she walks the path that only she can walk.

And: In the Gospel of Matthew, there is no indication of what, *if anything*, Mary knows about what is happening to her. If you let this story stand alone, and don't read anything from the Gospel of Luke into it – well, Matthew doesn't say that an angel ever visits Mary. Matthew doesn't say that Mary understands how God's purposes are playing themselves out in her life and in her *body*. In Matthew's story, Mary is left utterly in the dark. We might very well imagine that she is confused and frightened and struggling and has no sense whatsoever that what she is living through is a miracle and not a nightmare.

We might very well imagine that Joseph knows something about her suffering that she herself does not know and, being still in the midst of it, hanging on by a thread as she is, cannot know: that God is with her, that God is doing something in her, that God is *doing* something in what feels to her like her *undoing*.

To be a stepfather of God is to see what someone else cannot yet see, and to believe for them what they cannot believe, and to hope against hope when they cannot hope. To be a stepfather of God is to care for their miracle, especially when they cannot care for it themselves.

Isn't this what it means to be a friend? Isn't this what it means to be married? Isn't this what it means to be a parent, or be a grandparent? Isn't this what it means to be a teacher, to be a doctor or nurse, to be a boss or a mentor? To see and to believe and to hope other people's miracles into

being? To stand somewhat to the side, to give space enough for the miracle to unfold as it is meant to unfold, to let the miracle be their miracle, but to love it almost as if it were your own?

God is always quietly, secretly, growing people and healing people and transforming people, and sometimes we are given the extraordinary gift of getting to go along for the ride. What do we do, then? Well, what does Joseph do? Does Joseph tell Mary what he sees, what he sees in her? Or does he simply ponder this in his heart, and let her awaken to her own truth in her own time? Matthew's gospel doesn't say.

There is a Jewish legend about the *Tzadikim Nistarim*, or the "hidden righteous ones." In every generation, so the legend goes, there are 36 women and men possessed of a special awareness of God's presence and love and power. They channel holiness and radiate holiness. Their righteousness is the foundation the world rests upon. Without it, without them, everything everywhere would fall to pieces. They are, at any given time, actively saving the world – only they're doing so without anyone knowing it.

They're doing so even without *themselves* knowing it. (Because truly, deeply holy people are too humble to think of themselves as such.) They *are* truly, deeply holy people, but they are otherwise ordinary people. As one of the old rabbis said, they are "wood-choppers and water-drawers" who live their lives without drawing attention to themselves. They perform righteous and good and wondrous acts, but more often than not, they do so in common, workaday deeds.

No one but God knows who the 36 are. It could very well be that the one you tuck into bed at night or drive to swim practice or sit down to dinner with, the one behind you in line in the grocery store, the one whose workday begins as yours ends, and goes around the office emptying the waist bins – it could very well be that any one of them is counted among the hidden righteous.

Did Joseph relate to Mary as if she were one of these hidden righteous ones? Did he watch her live her life and marvel to himself, just gently encouraging her, supporting her with the quiet constancy of his love? Or did he explode with amazement? Did he tell her that she is incredible? Did he tell her that he sees something happening in her life that is maybe the most beautiful thing he's ever seen? Did he tell her that she's radiant with God? Did he tell her that she is a living, breathing miracle? Did he assure her, did he promise her that he would go on seeing and celebrating the strength in her and the goodness in her even when she can no longer see it, that he would believe for her and would hope for her? ...Is there some holy mystery unfolding in the life of another person that you need to stand in loving awe before? Is there someone you have not marveled enough over? Is there someone who needs to hear you say, "You are a miracle"?