

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

Sermon: "Angels of Advent: Joseph & the Angel of the Lord"

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25

Rev. Steve Filyk

December 14, 2025

Opener: It Came Upon the Midnight Clear 148

Candle Lighting Hymn: Hope is a Star (peace is a ribbon)

Choruses: Jesus, Name Above All Names and What a Beautiful Name

After Sermon: Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming 151

Closer: Once in royal David's city 166

Last week we heard Luke's story

About how the angel Gabriel appeared to young Mary

Told her that she was highly favored

and that God had chosen her

to bear God's son.

We considered that God's favor

Often means taking on risks and responsibilities,

And I invited you to consider how God might be calling you

To serve him in the coming week.

So how did this invitation land for you

This past week?

Maybe you took the risk of inviting

A friend to our Longest Night service.

Maybe you noticed a coworker seemed down

And you asked what was going on.

Any maybe you considered doing something

riskier or more extravagant,

But then questioned how you could be sure

That this was something God was calling you to do.

Just because God *often* invites us to serve in ways

That stretch us,

that take us beyond our experience our resources,

Doesn't mean that risk-taking equates to faithfulness.

We still need to discern what God is calling us to do.

PAUSE

Today we move from the Gospel of Luke to the Gospel of Matthew,

And consider the story of Jesus advent from another perspective.

Today we meet someone who had far less clarity than Mary,

and far more to lose: Joseph.

Matthew begins his Gospel with a statement

About Jesus being the promised Messiah,

The long-awaited Son of David

and descent of Abraham.

Matthew states this

and then proves this with a genealogy

Of the chosen people

that portrays Jesus as the culmination

Of Israel's history. (see Keener 1)

This is followed by today's reading.

In today's reading we hear how Joseph

Learns that Mary, the woman he had pledged to wed,

Was pregnant.

Imagine his shock, his surprise.

You may recall that after Gabriel's appearance,

Mary went to visit her cousin Elizabeth,

Staying with her a few months.

Maybe people noticed a change in her when she returned.

Eventually it would become evident.  
You can only hide a pregnancy so long.

Imagine Joseph's shock.  
He knows he didn't get her pregnant.  
He wasn't responsible for that growing tummy.

So what was he to do?

Joseph would have spent a lot of time  
Considering which young lady  
He thought would make a good wife,  
companion, mother.

So did he completely misjudge Mary?  
Or did someone force themselves on her?

If Mary told him that story of the angel Gabriel  
about how this was God's doing,  
It would only complicate the matter.

It would be easier to believe  
She was trying to cover up a rape  
or a poor decision,  
That accept this fantastic story.

And if she was lying,  
this meant she was guilty.  
And if she was guilty of adultery,  
This meant he could not marry her.  
"Sexual unfaithfulness was grounds for divorce  
throughout the ancient world;  
both law and custom...  
required a man to divorce an unfaithful wife or fiancée... "  
(CBSB 1609)

Of course obedience to the law  
would not erase the ache of his love.  
Joseph faced an impossible choice:  
obey the law, or trust the woman he loved.

After weighing all these matters,  
Joseph determined he would divorce her.  
He determined not to not make a public scene  
But to do it quietly.

And then Joseph had a dream.  
A dream in which "an angel of the Lord appeared".  
Note that this is different than those appearances  
Of the angel Gabriel in Luke.  
In Luke, a named angel appears  
while people are going about their everyday lives.  
Here in Matthew, an unnamed angel steps into Joseph's dream.

This angel tells him to not be afraid of taking Mary as his wife.  
Joseph is then told what Mary had been told,  
That what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

Mary will bear a son,  
And Joseph is to name him Jesus  
Because he "will save his people from their sins".

Just in case Joseph was wondering  
Whether this was congruent with Scripture,  
The Angel tells him that this happening  
is the fulfillment of an ancient prophecy:  
"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son,  
and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

PAUSE

I find it curious that God sends his messenger  
To Joseph in his dream.

Scripture doesn't tell us why  
 but there are probably more than a few good reasons,  
 including the fact that dreams  
 were understood by the ancients as  
 a legitimate way that God communicated with people.  
 Joseph's ancient namesake was known  
 For receiving divine insight and instruction through dreams.

At the same time, we recognise that in sleep  
 We are open and vulnerable.  
 In the evening it is quiet.  
 Maybe this was the place  
 Where God could most effectively reach Joseph.

Whatever the case, for Joseph this dream was convincing.  
 We are told that "When Joseph woke up,  
 he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him  
 and took Mary home as his wife."

Joseph's dream may feel distant from our own lives  
 but the question he faced is one we know well:  
 how do we recognize God's voice amid fear and uncertainty?

We are all called to follow Jesus in obedience.  
 On Sundays we spend a lot of time talking  
 About living in congruence with God's general will,  
 That is God's will for his people in all times and places,  
 A will that can easily be summarised in two commands:  
 Love God, love your neighbor.

But God also calls us to specific tasks  
 For specific purposes.  
 This often includes our various vocations  
 And a choice of a life mate.  
 But it can also include smaller but important objectives:  
 Like helping someone who lives on the margins,  
 Or fostering a new friendship,

Or supporting a project at church or in the community.

Sometimes those specific tasks are difficult to discern.  
 The Good News we hear today  
 is that God speaks in a whole variety of ways  
 So we can have the assurance  
 of knowing that we are moving in the right direction

God can speak to us through angelic messengers.  
 God can speak to us through dreams.  
 God can address us as we wait on him in prayer  
 Or bless us with moments of deeper insight.  
 God can reshape our desires  
 Or fill us with wisdom.  
 God can offer us wise counsel through others  
 Or reveal his will in circumstance and providence.

Keep in mind that this is all within the guardrails of God's general will  
 That is revealed in Holy Scripture.

Joseph would need to weigh his dream  
 with all the previous factors.  
 All things considered  
 he was convinced that taking Mary as his spouse  
 Was God's legitimate calling.

Joseph will need this clarity.  
 Even as he provides shelter for his new family,  
 This irregular pregnancy will mark them forever,  
 And they will be subject to the slander and whispers of neighbors.

And more dreams will follow for Joseph.  
 With him God will use this pattern of communication  
 To protect him and his family  
 from threats greater than his neighbors.  
 For his part, Joseph heeds these warnings.  
 It seems that Joseph learns what God's voice sounds like for him.

Today's lesson reminds us that God confirms his calling to each of us  
In ways that are often tailor to us,  
so we can receive them.

So what difficult decisions are you discerning at the moment?  
Maybe it is about medical treatment.  
Maybe it is about how to support a family member.  
Maybe it is about a particular investment of time or money.

The God who guided Joseph does not abandon us to guesswork.  
Take some time this week  
to consider how God might be speaking to you.  
Amen and amen.