

Advent IV (RCL/A): "Joseph Who??"

Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25

December 20-21, 2025

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Who has a Nativity scene in your home? Who's included? Thankfully Joseph always seem to make the cut, even though he doesn't get as much press as everyone else.

You men and dads out there know that when a woman is pregnant, the limelight is going to be on her, not on the baby's father. Maybe that's accepted because it's just-to-be-expected, but maybe sometimes it's like a little pebble in your shoe. So imagine Joseph, who isn't **even** the Baby's father! Second billing to the Blessed Virgin pretty much means you're in the wings or backstage. (Even having an angel visit you in your dreams seems kinda second-rate compared to having a day-time, real-time encounter like Mary had with Gabriel.) But it doesn't matter to Joseph. It's not just that he does what he's told. He does it devotedly, wholeheartedly, trustingly, without resentment or regret, content to play his unique, essential, though somewhat hidden role in the Greatest Story Ever Told.

Statues of Joseph show him either with a saw in his hands or the Baby Jesus in his arms. 'Seems like he's always dressed drably in brown. Sometimes he's holding a lily, signifying purity – because of the belief our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters have that Mary remained a virgin, so Joseph must have, too. (We Lutherans interpret Scripture to say that Jesus had younger brothers and sisters, so that's a point on which we agree to disagree ☺.) These days, most folks who think of Joseph at all probably associate him with real estate and the sale of homes. Most statues of Joseph today probably end up buried in the yard, along with a prayer that the house will sell. It's not an approved practice of the

Roman Catholic Church, but it's a widespread custom anyway. (I understand part of the deal is that you must remember to dig him up and take him along when the move occurs!)

Once people become plaster-of-Paris "saints," and literal statues are produced, we tend to view them in 2 dimensions rather than 3. They become part of a religious pantheon of beings who have little to do with our own lives and even less power to inform and shape our own faith. Let's **not** let that happen with Joseph.

Max Lucado is a best-selling spiritual author whom Ruth Walsh especially loved. Years ago we discussed his book, *Cast of Characters: Common People in the Hands of an Uncommon God*. The very first chapter is about Joseph. Lucado humanizes him by asking some questions of him, like:

- "Did you and Jesus arm wrestle? Did he ever let you win?"
- "Did you ever look up from your prayers and see Jesus listening?"³

Lucado also reminds us that Joseph was in agony after he found out his fiancée Mary was pregnant. He didn't want to shame her, but he couldn't see clear to marry her either, since she had apparently broken the Law by being unfaithful to him. Matthew describes Joseph as a *righteous* man. He didn't just mean that Joseph took his faith seriously, or that he was a rule follower. He also meant that Joseph, like Mary, was full of grace. He acted out of love as well as out of obedience. He was strong enough to be flexible; he was like a birch tree that will bend when the wind is too great or the snow is too heavy, not like an oak that will break. Joseph was so grounded in God that he could allow himself to hear God saying an amazing, brand new thing: "*Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.*" (Matthew 1:20) That ran contrary to everything

Joseph knew of life or of Scripture. He could easily have convinced himself that his compassion for Mary had conjured up that dream.

Lucado emphasizes it couldn't have been easy for Joseph to swallow the angel's message. A part of him must have screamed, "This is ridiculous! What do you mean the **Holy Spirit** planted the baby??" It's his version of Mary's question to Gabriel in Luke's Gospel: "*How can this be, since I am a virgin?*" (Luke 1:34) Lucado points out there are times in our lives, too, when we are "[c]aught between what God says and what makes sense."¹ He continues, "If you are asking [God] what Joseph asked ["Are you kidding??"], let me urge you to do what Joseph did. Obey... He didn't let his confusion disrupt his obedience... Because Joseph obeyed, God used him to change the world. Can he do the same with you?"²

Amen.

¹Max Lucado, *Cast of Characters: Common People in the Hands of an Uncommon God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), p. 6.

²Ibid, p. 7.

³Ibid, p.3

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham