

Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year A
A Sermon Preached by The Rev Ian M Delinger
on December 22, 2025

Isaiah 7:10-16 / Romans 1:1-7 / Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18 / Matthew 1:18-25

*We thank You, God, for the wilderness.
Wilderness is our place.
As we wait for the land of promise,
teach us the ways of new living, lead us to where we hear Your word most clearly,
renew us and clear out the wastelands of our lives,
prepare us for life in the awareness of Christ's coming
when the desert will sing and the wilderness will blossom as the rose. Amen.*

Today's Gospel has some deep theological nuggets in it. These nuggets have helped shape our faith, and it has been the foundation of some great Christmas media. In church, and in most media renditions, this story, and all the other stories in Matthew and Luke that contribute to the Birth Narrative, are presented with much serene reverence! But when you really think about the text, when you think about what's really going on, it's a bit crazy! There is quite a bit of drama! This is the original Hallmark Christmas movie!

5yrs ago, I watched my first Christmas movie. While trying to maintain the serenity and allure of a Normal Rockwell picture, these movies also insert some much-needed drama in order to retain the attention of their audiences. Hallmark alone created 24 new Christmas movies for this year, and that doesn't include the other streaming services who also produce Christmas movies. So, they've gotta have some high drama to keep you coming back for more.

2yrs ago, a team at the New York Times analyzed 424 Christmas movies. And there's definitely a formula for most of them. I'll share that with you.

<HAND OUT FLOWCHART>

Since my first one during Lockdown, I have watched probably a dozen Christmas movies, and I would say that the flowchart is pretty accurate. So, when I was

reading the Original Christmas Movie script – today’s Gospel – I thought I would see if it fit into the formula...and it sort of does.

1. *Some time in March (HA!)*
2. *A humble carpenter*
3. *is sleeping*
4. *and meets an angel*
5. *Meanwhile, by the power of the Holy Spirit his fiancé becomes with child.*
6. *In the end he decides to marry her anyway.*

And then they raise the Son of God together.

The truth is that the Birth Narrative – the Christmas Story – is one of high drama! The theological nuggets I mentioned come from that drama. And Joseph’s story is the beginning of that drama. There is no way – even correcting for time and locational differences – that this arrangement was not stressful and filled with drama. And probably a bit more drama than trying to save a local dairy farm.

Does everyone here know the song by the band Queen called *Bohemian Rhapsody*? Well, several years ago, a Christian puppet group created a video called [Bethlehemian Rhapsody](#), which tells the Birth Narrative to the tune of *Bohemian Rhapsody*. And the music brings to life some of the drama of the story. Joseph’s story isn’t part of it, but pretty much everything else is, including the Holy Family’s Flight to Egypt as refugees fleeing violent persecution by Herod. I highly recommend that you seek out this video.

Why bring up the drama? Why is the drama important? If we ignore the drama and only focus on the nostalgia of a bygone era, it ceases to be real, and we miss that the story is one that includes us. This story is not just about Joseph, Mary and Jesus. It’s about the Salvation of Humanity – it’s about our salvation. That Salvation has always been about a relationship between God and Humanity. And that relationship was deepened when the transcendent and distant God became the imminent and incarnated God.

The drama of Joseph's story no doubt came with the public shame associated with marrying a woman pregnant with someone else's baby. The drama of Joseph's story came with having to be the protector and provider for Emmanuel, God With Us, with the weight of "*the One who saves*" and humanity's Salvation connected to that. The drama of Joseph's story came with an unwavering commitment: not only to Mary but to God.

Commitment means the pledging or engaging of oneself, and it comes with full autonomy. Though Joseph "*did as the angel of the Lord commanded him*", he did not have to; there is a sense of choice. He had already decided to dismiss Mary before the visit from the angel.

Joseph was a carpenter of humble means. He didn't have a palace or wealth with which to hide Mary and shield her from disgrace. He could only do that by committing to her as her husband. His commitment meant protecting Mary and being the earthly father to Jesus. And from the moment Jesus was born, Joseph was thrust into situations that no person should have to endure.

As part of his commitment, Joseph left everything behind – family, work, income, home – to become a refugee. Jesus, Mary and Joseph were forced to flee to Egypt to escape Herod's desire to kill the Child King. Joseph was also committed to raising Jesus as a faithful Jew of Nazareth. Maybe Joseph thought that raising the Son of God would be easy, but I doubt that he was naïve to the potential headaches.

We all have drama in our lives. Perhaps not to the same degree as Joseph. But there is drama. For some drama, it's healthier to walk away from it. But when we are committed to the people or the cause, we are willing to endure the drama because we know that, on the other side of that drama, there will be peace and stronger relationships.

So it is with our faith. We are committed to God, and we are committed to seeking God on our journey together as the St Stephen's Family. Our faith journeys come with doubts and questions, just like Joseph's did. It comes with times when we just want to give up, which I'm sure Joseph wanted to at several points. Our faith journeys come with unexpected surprises, both good and bad. And it is within this community of faithful people that we can tackle those surprises.

You will notice at the end of the Christmas movie flowchart, the couple finally kisses. But long before that, the audience can sense the tension created by one being attracted to the other, but the other either unaware or not interested ... until they are. That character is the one who is always too busy trying to solve the problem that exists in the small town that they found themselves in.

In Joseph's Christmas movie, as in our drama, the one who is *always* interested in God! We are the ones who are often too busy trying to solve life's problems to remember to take time for God. But God is always here; God is always interested; God always loves us. *That* is God's commitment to *us*. And that commitment came in Jesus Christ, to whom Joseph was also committed.

The way in which God came into this world is not a serene and stoic scene in a Robert Redford film. God came into this world in a very messy way, starting with Joseph's drama, to experience the human condition, to experience the high drama that we experience so that we know and believe that "*surely He has borne our griefs.*" When we read Joseph's story and realize the drama that far exceeds a Christmas movie, we must remember that his story shows us that salvation wasn't Divine magic or about being on Santa's Nice List, but that salvation is a genuine relationship between God and humanity.

In these few days left in Advent, let us meet God's commitment with our own commitment, and let it deepen our relationship as we enjoy the drama of our Christmas celebration to come.