

**“Joseph” - The Rev. Jennifer Adams**  
**December 19, 2010 - Advent 4A**

Once every three years in the lectionary cycle we get Joseph’s story on Advent 4, because it’s one of the ways that the gospel of Matthew talks about the birth of Christ. In Luke, we get the Annunciation, the Angel Gabriel, Mary visiting Elizabeth and the singing of the Magnificent. The gospel of John is full of the mystical poetry of “the Word becoming flesh” which we hear on the first Sunday after Christmas. The gospel of Mark just skips the birth narrative all together. He starts with John the Baptist out in the wilderness shouting about repentance and the kingdom of God and then Jesus enters the scene as an adult. But Matthew who we heard from this morning gives us Joseph who for so many reasons, you’ve just got to love.

Because the circumstances were crazy! His betrothed was suddenly, inexplicably pregnant and he was faced with some horrendously difficult choices. Now Matthew described Joseph as “a righteous man”, which was probably why Joseph’s initial decision was to simply let Mary go quietly. He didn’t want to “disgrace her publically,” the gospel says, so no fits thrown, no public outcries made just a quiet stepping away from the scene. But just when Joseph was about to do it, to break it off completely an angel came to him in a dream and told him to take Mary as his wife. The angel told him that while it of course it appeared unarguably shaky, the Holy Spirit was actually behind all of it, “So marry her,” the angel said, “And don’t be afraid. Because God will be with you and Christ will be born to you. And that’s really all you need to know.” And so Joseph (again that righteous piece kicking in) did what the angel said. He took Mary as his wife and was by her side the whole way -- as the baby was born, when the shepherds arrived and as the angels hovered ‘round.

And we know how the story unfolds from there. But today, this Sunday isn’t so much about that first holy night in Bethlehem; it’s more about how it got to that point. This service of Advent Lessons and Carols invites us to listen not only to the birth of Christ piece of the story but to what preceded it, to what led up to Jesus, how the stage got set for the coming of the Messiah. Abbreviated as it might have been you got the gist of it this morning: First there was Creation, then there was the Fall, then there were lots of “begats”. There were Kings and exiles; There were priests and there were prophets who proclaimed the coming of the Lord and then it happened. Christ was born.

Now part of what I’m struck by every time I hear the story laid out this way is how fragile it all seemed to have been, as if it was held together by a string. You’d think God would’ve super glued it or something but my goodness, the story wasn’t exactly smooth. There was sin, there was rebellion, there were false prophets and true prophets, wars and insurrections, betrayals and deaths; there was neglect and abuse and unpredictability at every turn. Look at these people – brothers killing brothers, pharaohs enslaving people, Kings getting sucked into the glory of power and treating entire peoples badly, and prophets who didn’t even want the job. Even the actual lineage of the Messiah doesn’t appear to have been the most solid of foundations. Matthew tells us that – women like Ruth and Tamar and Rahab were in the list of people who led up to Jesus and they weren’t exactly the shiniest, purest line you could have arranged for the Son of God. The circumstances of this whole drama seem to have been somewhat shaky, so easily breakable – right down to what we heard today - a young unknown virgin betrothed to a faithful

yet unknown carpenter on whose angelically guided decisions the whole story turned? Wow. It all seems so uncertain, so fragile. It all seems, so well, human.

Which I suppose is the point, isn't it. Joseph was just a man. And Mary was just a woman. And the people before them had made the occasional bad decision. And all of humanity had sinned. And many of them had misused their authority. And some prophets had hit the target and others had missed it completely. But here's the miracle of it, God still came. God came anyway. Despite it. Because of it. Into it all. God came. Among us. As us. For us. With us. God came. This is the story of what God did and how God did it and if it looks like nothing more than a string holds it together maybe that's because sometimes that's how life is. And God came to us in life. God comes in ways and places that common sense wouldn't, into those pieces of our stories that make us tremble and wonder and occasionally break and in those places, among those people, among us and them, God makes miracles happen.

And so we are Mary and we are Joseph. And we have power and privilege too. We are prophets and we are shepherds and we are fragile too but according to the angels all we need to hear is this, "A miracle is on its way, so, don't be afraid. God will be with you. And Christ will be born to you. That's all you need to know." Amen.