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Sermon  
Trinity Church Boston  
Advent 4, Year A  
December 18, 2022

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together always be acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Last year I had this idea that I could get to know the congregation of Trinity by asking some questions- even though we had only about 93 participants during our registration time, which goes to show just how far we have come in the past year! Alleluia! But I have a better field to do some very scientific surveys in this morning—

How many of you prefer colored lights on the tree?

How many of you prefer white lights on the tree?

How many of you plan out your Christmas decorations, and know where everything is and where everything goes?

How many of you sit in a mess of lights and wonder where most of your holiday décor is from last year?

Now I know you all better.

On Advent 4 because we usually get the story of the Visitation between Elizabeth and Mary—or the Annunciation of Gabriel to Mary. All stories of expectation—that unstitching of human limits to welcome ‘God with us’ to be really with us.

But this is the year where we get a different story—it’s the story of Joseph. Of the dream given to him as he considers his reputation, his place and the integrity of the woman he is engaged to marry who is suddenly pregnant and telling a farcical story as explanation.

If you have ever gazed up and around at the windows here at Trinity, and I strongly suggest that you tear yourself away from your bulletin and look up and around here—and especially take a look this season at the windows depicting the Nativity. The first, the Walter Window, given in honor of Trinity’s 3<sup>rd</sup> Rector, up here in the apse, has the holy family adoring the newborn Christ. Notice that Joseph is a younger man, Mary has flowing blond Instagram-able locks, and that no woman has ever been able to get into that physical position following any kind of birth. Up here in the transept, we have the three so-called ‘Christmas Windows’, designed by Edward Burnes-Jones in the late 1800s<sup>1</sup>, but which to my mind feel almost contemporary—Joseph is an older man here, and Mary’s posture is one of deep protection, and the whole cast of the pageant surrounds them in the traditional nativity tableau. My guess is that your nativity sets at home look similar to these windows, if not in detail, then in choreography.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.trinitychurchboston.org/blog/forum-video-a-second-look-trinitys-christmas-windows>

In Eastern Orthodox icons of the nativity, however, we are given a different scene<sup>2</sup>. Mary is presented in the center of the icon in a cave—not a barn-- encapsulated in a kind of womb-like bubble, lying prone with the holy child next to her. There are other people in the icon as well, each in their own space and owning their own part of the story—the midwives, the magi, the shepherds, angels and finally, you notice Joseph. In the iconography, Joseph is almost always sitting at the bottom right hand of the frame, chin in hand, looking very confused.

In all honesty, I don't think about Joseph all that often in my anticipation of the nativity. The role of Joseph in Christmas pageants of yore was a small one—in my church growing up, it was reserved for any boy who was old enough to lead a live donkey down an aisle, but young enough to not vehemently refuse parents who \*really\* wanted him to be in the pageant. The only lines in that pageant that Joseph had were, “Is there room at the inn?”—lines so apparently pivotal, that Joseph never got his own microphone at my church growing up, but had to lean in close to Mary's mic so that his two lines could get picked up and heard throughout the sanctuary.

But today, Joseph, a man who from all intents and circumstances was a perfectly ordinary individual, seeking an ordinary life, is thrust into a situation far beyond his control.

Joseph had options. Being engaged was a legal contract, and he could easily shun Mary, which would have led to the possibility of her being stoned as punishment. He could have divorced her quietly, which would have led not only to her disenfranchisement, but to her having no support and left to beg or worse. Just as Mary had the option to say no, Joseph did so too. In extra-biblical texts<sup>3</sup>, we have far more nuanced responses by both of these holy people to this announcement from Gabriel— in those texts, Mary runs away from Gabriel, and Joseph, who is recorded as being an older man with children of his own already, throws a fit, throwing himself on the ground because he did not want this “gift”. These pericopes did not make it into the final compilation of our scripture for, perhaps, political reasons<sup>4</sup>.

But they do show us the reality of the messiness into which God comes.

Unlike Mary, Joseph didn't have the opportunity to engage with Gabriel, but was given his message through a dream. Do not be afraid, he hears. Do not be afraid because your world is turning upside down. Do not be afraid because people are going to whisper about you, spread rumors about you, and your very reputation will be at stake. Do not be afraid of the mess, Gabriel says to Joseph.

There is a temptation to skip these last days of Advent and move directly to Christmas, especially when we have had a long, nearly five-week Advent as we have had this year. We've waited. We've atoned. We've made it through John the Baptist, the apocalypse, and stopping our

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<sup>2</sup> For example: <https://www.goarch.org/-/icon-of-the-nativity>

<sup>3</sup> Protoevangelium of James is the source I use here—you can find out about it here: <https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/infancyjames.html>

<sup>4</sup> You can read a brief synopsis of why it was excluded from the Biblical Canon here: [https://brill.com/view/journals/scr/14/1/article-p223\\_15.xml?language=en](https://brill.com/view/journals/scr/14/1/article-p223_15.xml?language=en), but it was more widely embraced in the Eastern Church, which also finds the apocryphal stories of Anna and Mary's own 'immaculate conception' (which the Western Church, especially the Catholics, have adopted).

children (and ourselves) from opening every single window on the Advent calendar before December actually began. The greens are up, we are two thirds of the way through Candlelight Carols, and, friends, standard shipping is no longer an option.

But let's stay for a moment in the mess. It is convenient that God's dream to Joseph—and dreams are powerful harbingers in the tradition of Israel—clarifies his current situation with Mary, however, the directives are open-ended: stay with Mary. Trust her story. Name the child and claim him. The rest will unfold.

Messes are easier to negotiate in some ways when we are in the middle of them, and directly impacted. They are less controllable when we are neither the central character, nor able to change anything regarding the outcome, when it is not our story to tell, but another's story to hear and heed. I love the extracanonical stories of the Nativity because of how real they are—Joseph is not a tacit, underwhelming, plus one of Mary—but a whole being who has taken a late in life detour not of his own creation. His confusion is so real in the iconography of the East, and it bears honoring.

The messiness of this world is real. The messiness of human lives, which no gift under the tree can rectify. The messiness of relationships, which Hallmark cannot fix. The messiness of grief, which no Christmas social calendar can resolve. The messiness of hopes and plans changed, of reputations altered, of futures not our own dissolved. The messiness which drives us into elaborate forms of holiday anesthesia from what we cannot control and how deeply we are asked to name and recognize it all.

And perhaps this is where the iconography of the Western Church comes into play best—that in the mess, in the deep unsettling and imperfection—we have an image of a person who comes along for it, who becomes Mary's unsuspecting 'ride or die'. Joseph, three steps past his tantrum on the ground, steps into this story by trusting Mary, trusting God, trusting that there is something in this detour which is holy. He's there, walking with Mary, no longer in the corner pouting (my words, not the iconographer's)—he's in it. He's past the ego-shattering vulnerability of this uncontrollable mess, he's two feet deep and wading in fast.

When this season's holiday marketing ends, we can find that lag in euphoria strange and uncomfortable. Stillness in this time of busy is an anathema, and yet—yet that is the gift we have been given in this final week of Advent. To not sweep away our mess under the mat, or the table, or hide it away in a closet until the guests have left. God knows the mess. God is with us in it, and God will somehow—some way—transform the mess into something which can reflect love no matter what. Christmas won't fix what ails us and what worries us, no matter how many Christmas specials use that very assertion as a plot narrative. But God coming among us, as one of us in Jesus, means that we are no longer in need of a quick fix, for we have a savior who loves us in the mess and grief and discomfort, and who will not leave after the 25<sup>th</sup> or after Epiphany or even at the end of our lives. Jesus is the one who will be God with us without end. Let us make him room.

Amen.