

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
To be delivered on December 18, 2016	On the occasion of the Fourth Sunday of Advent, A

Matthew 1:18-25

“Here Comes This Dreamer”

This time of year Mary gets all the attention. But this year, year “A” in our three-year lectionary cycle, has most of the Gospel readings on Sundays from Matthew’s Gospel. Unlike Luke, who includes the annunciation to Mary by the angel Gabriel, Mary’s visitation to Elizabeth, and the *Magnificat*-or Song of Mary, Matthew tells the story of Jesus’ birth from Joseph’s perspective. Like Mary, Joseph is visited by an angel. Joseph’s angel speaks to him in a dream.

The Gospels do not have a lot of information about Joseph. He isn’t really mentioned outside of the birth narratives. It is usually assumed that he was quite a bit older than Mary, and that he died by the time Jesus began his ministry, which would have freed Mary to travel with her son. Given that we do not have a lot of information about Joseph, we look closely at what we do have to learn what we are able to learn about the man.

Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man. That’s no small thing. In the Scriptures, being a righteous man is very important. Noah was a righteous man, and it got him a ride on the ark. Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness, and he was made the father of a nation. Lot was a righteous man, and he was saved from the destruction of Sodom. So, to be called a righteous man is no small thing. In Joseph’s case, he was betrothed to be married to Mary when she was found to be pregnant. He knew that the baby was not his. The righteous thing, then, was to dismiss her. In fact. Mary could have been in big trouble for being pregnant out of wedlock. So, being a righteous man, Joseph planned to dismiss her. But not

only was Joseph righteous, he was obviously merciful too. He planned to dismiss her quietly, so as not to expose her to public disgrace.

Being merciful is no small thing either. Mercy is a divine trait. To be merciful, one must first be understanding and empathetic. One must be willing to suffer somewhat in order to have mercy. Joseph was willing to suffer quietly the loss of his betrothed, not to mention quite a blow to his honor, in order to protect her. Mercy always has a cost. The merciful are willing to pay it.

Joseph did not dismiss Mary, however. This dreamer heard from an angel that the child Mary was going to have was from the Holy Spirit. Hard to say how one might react to such news, but Joseph believed the angel's message, and he was willing to take Mary as his wife. So in addition to being righteous and merciful, Joseph was faithful as well. His faithfulness allowed him to believe the angel. His faithfulness allowed him to do as God commanded him. His faithfulness allowed him to trust that God would do as he promised and use this child to save his people. Joseph didn't know it yet, but his faithfulness would take him very far from home, on great adventures, and through great adversity. I think that it was Joseph's faithfulness that allowed him to be so courageous.

Courage can come from many places: desperation, ignorance, even stupidity or drunkenness can give a person courage. Joseph's courage, however, was a kind of steadiness, a steadfastness. His was a courage born from a lifetime of hard work, holy habits, and simple faith in God's goodness. Joseph courageously faced the public shame of marrying a pregnant woman. Later he would be warned by an angel, again in a dream, to take his wife and child and flee to Egypt to protect them from Herod's jealous wrath. After living in Egypt for some time, he would then be informed by an angel, once again in a dream, that it was safe to return to Israel. He would settle in Nazareth and raise Jesus there. We can assume that Joseph taught Jesus his

trade, and that he taught him about the history of his people, and how God had acted throughout their history to save them and always to lead them home.

The most courageous thing that Joseph did was agree to raise God's son. There was no way of telling what consequences there would be for his willingness to be Jesus' father, but he surely would have realized the weight of the decision he made. This was an unprecedented thing, God having a child. Joseph would have known that the child was destined for something great. To take on that responsibility, raising God's son as your own, preparing him for whatever great challenge he would face, this was an awesome thing. Joseph may not have lived to see his son die on the cross, but there must have been hints along the way of what sort of man Jesus would be, perhaps even hints of what kind of fate awaited him. With all that knowledge, and with all his suspicions, Joseph still said 'yes'.

Mary usually gets the attention during Advent. To be sure she played a unique and instrumental role in God's plan for salvation. But let's not overlook Joseph. The brief glimpse that Scripture gives us of his personality is by no means a complete picture of the man. Still, in these few verses we meet a man who is undoubtedly righteous, merciful, faithful and courageous. We know this from his reactions to Mary and to the angel in his dream. We know this also because Joseph raised his son to be just like him.

Amen.