

Matthew 1:18–25  
Advent IV/Vigil of Christmas  
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.  
December 24, 2023

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

Today is a strange day that occurs every 6–11 years, depending on leap years. It's the last Sunday of Advent, but it's also Christmas Eve, or more properly speaking, the vigil of the Nativity of our Lord. Just like we have Easter vigil the day before Easter, so do we hold Christmas vigil the day before Christmas. Yes, it's the fourth Sunday of Advent. But we can't get around the fact that today is also the day before Christmas. It's the fourth Sunday of Advent, which is why the paraments and vestments are still violet, the color of repentance. But it's also Christmas Eve, whether you're ready or not. And so the readings for this morning reflect that today is the vigil of Christmas. This evening you'll hear the Christmas story from Mary's perspective, according to Luke chapter 2. That's the Christmas Eve story we all know and love. But this morning, we consider the Christmas story from the perspective of Joseph as recorded in the first chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel.

The angel Gabriel had already announced to Mary, the fiancée of Joseph, that the Holy Spirit would overshadow her and she would conceive the Son of God. And so before Joseph and Mary came together as husband and wife, Mary was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Of course, for Joseph all this would be a bit unbelievable. His young fiancée ends up pregnant and one thing is for certain: Joseph is not the father. He knows that much. But whose is it? Maybe that's not so important. All Joseph knows is that according to the regular order of things, Mary has been unfaithful. Now the only question is what to do about it.

According to Old Testament law, there's a procedure for dealing with situations like this. Deuteronomy 22:23–24 says: “If there is a betrothed virgin, and a man meets her in the city and lies with her, then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city, and you shall stone them to death with stones . . . So you shall purge the evil from your midst.” According to Scripture, adultery is a capital offense. The destruction of marriage is the destruction of human life. The punishment fits the crime. You see an example of this Old Testament justice in John 8. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman to Jesus as he was teaching in the Temple. They said to Him: “Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?” That's when Jesus says to the scribes and Pharisees: “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.” And that's when Jesus says to the woman: “Go, and from now on sin no more.” Adultery is a capital offense, but Jesus is a merciful judge. He takes the punishment of our sins upon Himself, not that we might keep on sinning, but that we might go and sin no more.

Joseph was a just man, or more accurately put, a righteous man. Justice is blind. If justice were served, Mary would be stoned for the evidence against her: a child in her womb that is not of her husband. But Joseph is righteous, conforming not just to the standard of God in the Law of Moses, but conforming to the will and character of God. It is not ever God's will for adultery to take place. Adultery is always sin against the 6th Commandment. But God also does not desire the death of the wicked, but that the wicked would turn from their evil ways and live (Ez 18:23; 33:11). God is just, but He is also merciful and the mercy of God triumphs over judgment (James 2:13). We see this especially in Jesus Christ, the innocent victim who suffered justice on our behalf, that we might receive mercy. Joseph was a righteous man. He wanted mercy to triumph

over justice. He did not want Mary publicly shamed for the mistakes she might have made, so he resolved to divorce her quietly.

As Joseph was considering all these things, an angel of the LORD appeared to him in a dream. In the Gospel of Luke, an angel of the LORD appeared to Zechariah in the Temple, and then the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary to announce the conception of Christ by the Holy Spirit. Now an angel appears to Joseph in a dream, which is no less real than the other appearances of angels. Joseph's dream with the angel calls to mind that other dreamer named Joseph, the son of Jacob. In Genesis 37, Joseph is sold into slavery in Egypt on account of his dreams. In prison, Joseph interpreted the dreams of Pharaoh's baker and cupbearer and then became ruler of Egypt for interpreting Pharaoh's dream. In both Joseph in the Old Testament and Joseph in the New Testament, God works through dreams to see to it that His will is accomplished.

The angel of the LORD addresses Joseph in his dream according to his genealogy listed at the beginning of Matthew chapter 1: "Joseph, son of David." Although Jesus is not the biological son of Joseph, he becomes the legal son of Joseph, which is important for the messianic promises passed down from father to son, from father Abraham through King David, all the way down to Jesus. The genealogy of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel is a genealogy of promise. There are skeletons in the closet, as there are skeletons in everyone's closets. Sin infects the entire human race. Perez and Zerah were born of Tamar, impregnated by her father-in-law, Judah. Rahab was a Canaanite prostitute living in Jericho. Ruth was a Moabitess. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, the Hittite. That is, King Solomon was born in the midst of adultery and murder. One thing is clear from the genealogy leading from Abraham to David, to Joseph and Jesus: it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring (Rom 9:8). God takes unworthy vessels and

makes them into vessels of honor, as those through whom the Christ would come. Through Joseph, Jesus is legally connected to King David. And through Joseph, Jesus, though born without sin, is also connected to the sins of the fathers.

The angel assures Joseph that Mary is not pregnant by another man. Contrary to all reason, experience, or feelings, the angel explains to Joseph in his dream that the child conceived in the womb of the virgin Mary is not from another man but from the Holy Spirit. This is not a case of adultery. It's the greatest of miracles for the salvation of God's people. The angel continues: "She will bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." The name Jesus comes from the Hebrew name "Joshua," meaning "the LORD is salvation." Jesus is the true Joshua, the one who leads the true Israel into the true promised land. He is the victorious warrior who vanquishes the enemies of God's people and gives true Sabbath rest for the people of God (Heb 4:8). The LORD is our salvation. Jesus Christ is our salvation, the one who saves us from our sins.

St. Matthew explains that all this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet Isaiah, chapter 7:14, "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). In case Joseph had any doubts about Mary's faithfulness, or about this crazy dream he had, if there were any doubts whatsoever, Joseph still had the clear word of God from the Old Testament. If it were just Mary's word or just the angel's word, there might still be doubt about what was happening. Even the Devil appears as an angel of light, so who's to say this isn't one of those times? It might have seemed to Joseph as though this angel is trying to cover up Mary's infidelity, which doesn't exactly sound like something of God. But there can be no doubt about what Mary and the angel say because it is backed up by Scripture, by the prophet Isaiah's clear words that "the virgin shall conceive and

bear a son.” Humanly speaking this is an impossibility! But with God, all things are possible. God miraculously created all things, so if He promises 700 years before the event that a virgin would conceive without any interference of man, then He can certainly do that. It was the LORD who spoke through the prophet Isaiah, that this sign of the coming Christ would be written down and preserved as the clearest witness for when that day would come. The words and promises of God are more sure than our human reason and understanding.

And Isaiah doesn’t just prophesy that a virgin would conceive and bear a son. Isaiah also prophesies who that son would be: Immanuel, meaning “God with us.” The Son of the Virgin would also be the Son of God, conceived by the Holy Spirit. God is everywhere, so He’s always with us. But since the incarnation, God is with us in a unique way, in a way He planned in eternity. Now God is with us as our brother, as one of us. He’s not just some otherworldly, transcendent, divine being who is out of our reach. That’s how the pagan world thinks of God. No, since the incarnation, since God became man, He is one of us, our flesh and blood relative, who took on our human nature that He might redeem it from sin, death, and the devil. And God told us in advance what would happen so we would have a sure foundation for when that glorious miracle happened. If all Joseph had was Mary’s story and the dream of an angel, he would be left in doubt. But God’s Word doesn’t leave us in doubt. It gives us assurance in spite of everything we see, think, and feel.

That Word of God was enough to convince Joseph. When he woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the LORD commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus. That Word of God is enough to convince us as well. Trust in the promises of God’s Word regardless of how unbelievable they seem at the time. Whether it’s how God describes the creation of the universe and everything in it, or the

redemption of the world, including you, in Jesus Christ, or the ongoing sanctification of your life by the power of the Holy Spirit, there are many realities God speaks about that we can only hold onto in faith. Here we don't necessarily see all that is going on, but one day in eternity, the veil will be pulled back and we will see firsthand how God always remains true to His Word of promise. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.